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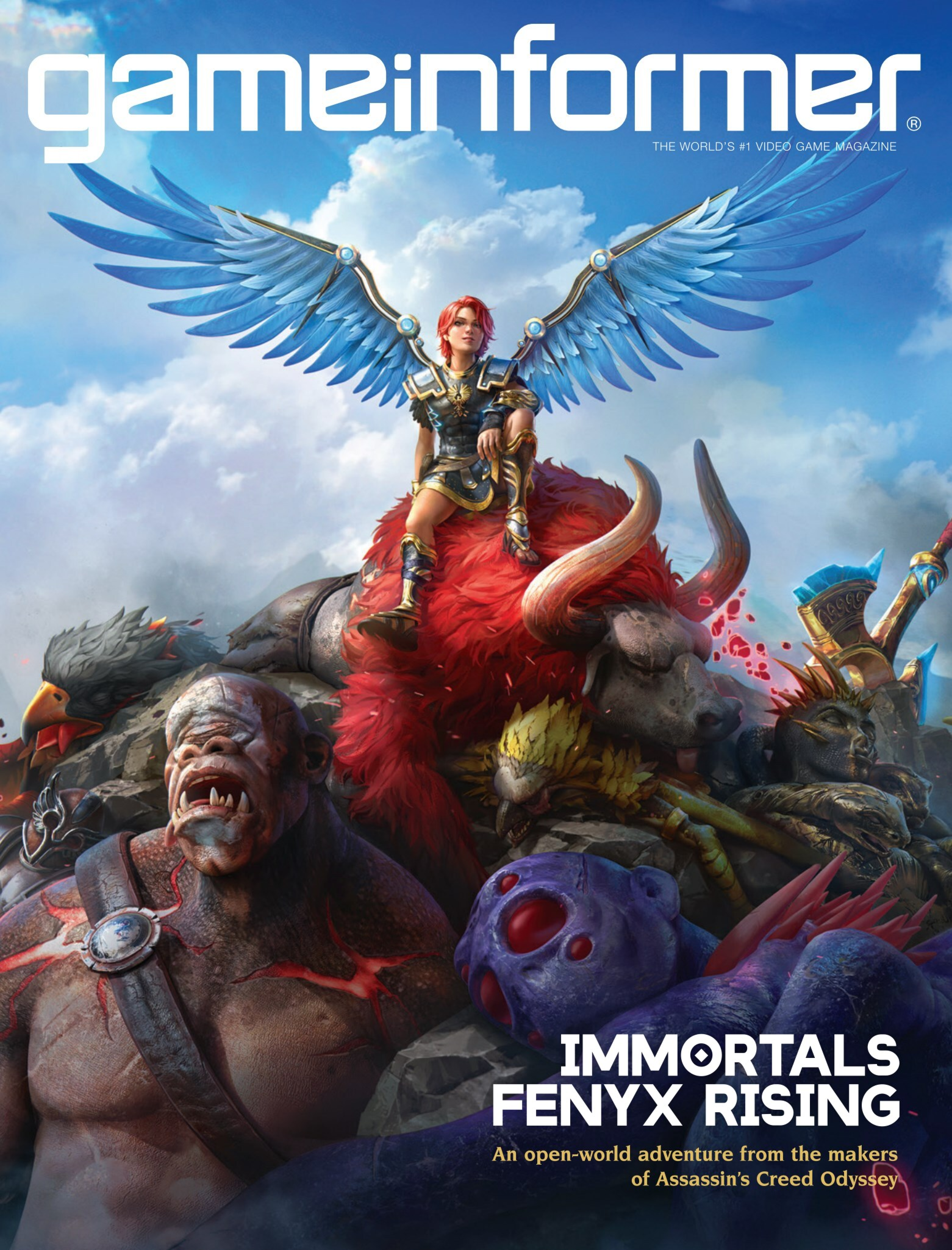

IMMORTALS FENYX RISING

An open-world adventure from the makers of Assassin's Creed Odyssey

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ANDREW REINER
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The Verdict Is In

With the arrival of PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, the future of games is here. We've sunk considerable amounts of time into both systems to bring you complete reviews that will hopefully give you an idea of which one better suits your gaming needs.

PlayStation 5 changes the script with its innovative controller and faster SSD, whereas Xbox Series X/S thumps its chest with power and its handy Quick Resume function, continuing to remind us why Game Pass is the best deal out there. Both machines deliver on the promise of being truly next gen. Once you get your hands on either of them, it'll be hard to go back to the previous generation. They both offer meaningful changes, making our games load faster, look better, and even play at higher framerates.

I just hope you are able to get your hands on them. During launches, console manufacturers almost always fail to meet consumer demand. We stand in lines, refresh websites, fumble as we enter credit-card info – and still most of us walk away empty-handed. Apple figured out how to get iPhones into as many hands that want them; why do Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo always come up short? If the answer is the manufacturing process is slow and they can only produce so many units by launch day, why not delay the launch until a surplus can be delivered? We should be excited by the prospect of getting a new console, not frustrated and stressed out.

If you are lucky enough to pick up one or both of these awesome machines, drop us a line and let us know what you think of the new generation. Along with the aforementioned reviews for both systems, this issue highlights a few peripherals you may want to get at launch, and we also give you looks at two big games that are coming soon: Immortals Fenyx Rising, which looks absolutely stunning, and The Medium, a horror experience set in two parallel worlds.

For more next-gen news and insight, check out gameinformer.com. It's still the same site as before, but we've assembled a new team dedicated just to online content and are pumping out excellent editorials, videos, news, and more. It's an exciting time for gaming, and we're going to show you why right here in the magazine and online.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

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Immortals Fenyx Rising

Ubisoft's newest franchise offers an epic journey through a colorful reimagining of ancient Greek mythology. We went hands-on and spoke with the developers to get a complete picture of this new open world before its launch. ***by Brian Shea***

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We spent dozens of hours putting the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S through their paces, and we're ready to share our hardware reviews.

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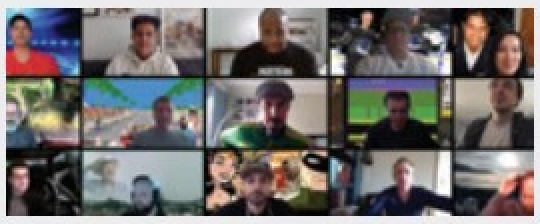

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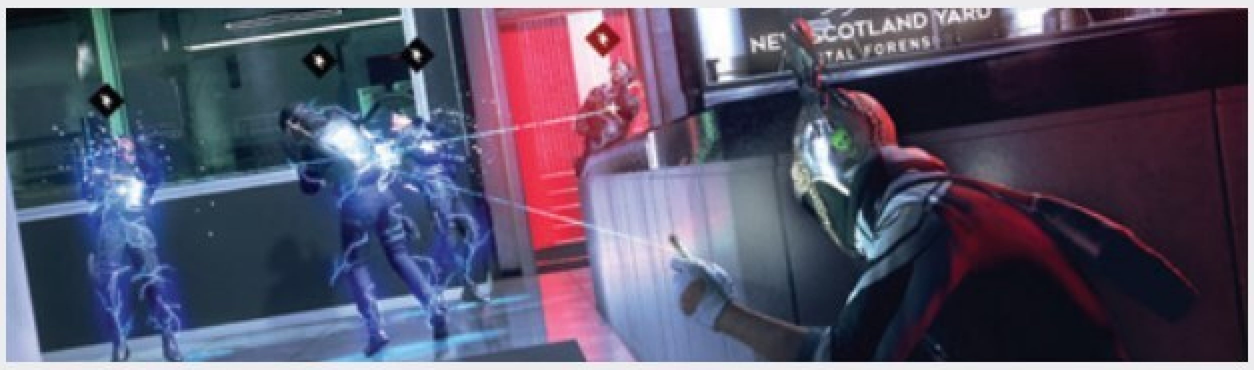
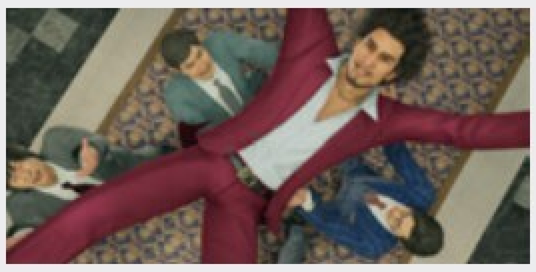
71 Spider-Man: Miles Morales A new Spidey is swinging into New York, and it's a stunning exclusive for Sony's PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5.

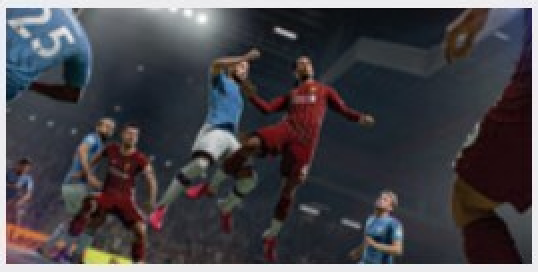


75 Watch Dogs: Legion Who will be your hero? The new entry ups the ante, letting you recruit virtually anyone to be your next protagonist as you infiltrate and hack your way to victory.

74 Assassin's Creed Valhalla Ubisoft explores the fascinating culture of the Vikings in yet another history-spanning entry in the long-running series.



77 Yakuza: Like A Dragon A new lead steps onto the stage in Sega's latest entry in the wildly entertaining role-playing game.



78 FIFA 21 The world's most popular sport comes out kicking, but has enough changed to justify a new trip to the pitch?

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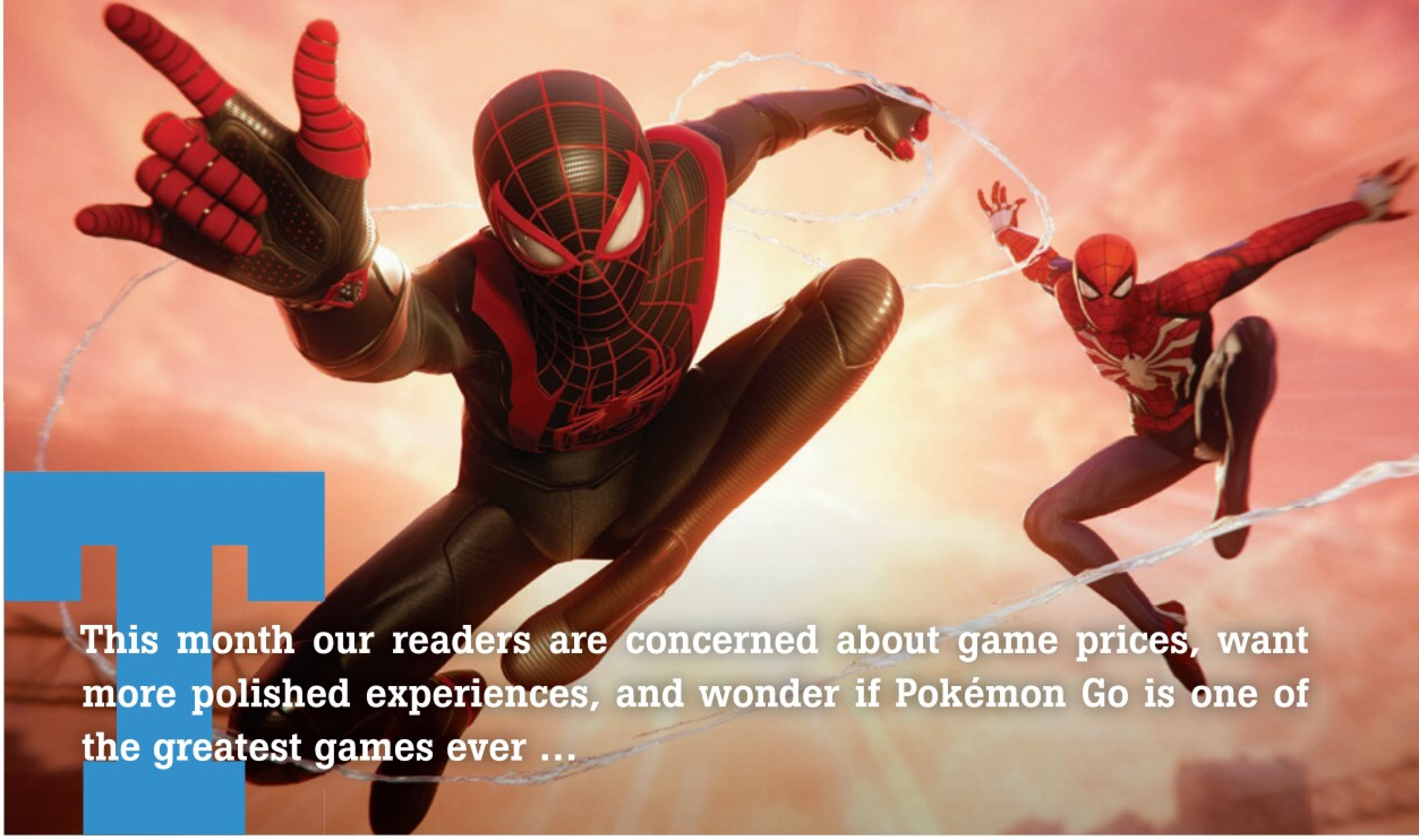


This month our readers are concerned about game prices, want more polished experiences, and wonder if Pokémon Go is one of the greatest games ever …

Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

I haven't left the house in eight months since I am considered to be high-risk for COVID-19 complications. Video games have been a big part of how I've stayed sane during this time. They deliver great escapism and relief. They take me to new places. Even though I've spent a lot of time in New York City as Peter Parker, what Insomniac Games is doing with Harlem in the Miles Morales sequel sounds like somewhere I need to be. I want to escape there and have that become my home just like it will be Miles'. Thanks to your story, GI, I'm now booking a ticket to virtual Harlem, and I also threw down $500 to get a PlayStation 5 to see it in its best form! Winter in New York will be lovely this year!

Jessica Amanpour
Atlanta, GA

I love what Insomniac Games is doing with Spider-Man: Miles Morales' story. It's not just a standalone chapter where time stands still. It continues the story from the first game, and gives the universe a true sense of progression. This is why I LOVE the Marvel Cinematic Universe and will see every movie, regardless if I am into the characters or not. Keep doing this Insomniac and I'll buy all of your superhero games. How about Spider-Gwen or Captain America next? Pretty please?

Kemba Simmons
Taos, NM

The footage you released of two Spider-Man characters swinging together makes me want a co-op game so bad! Do you think Insomniac Games will turn Spider-Man 2 into a cooperative game? I know that's a risky idea, but it just makes sense if you have two characters battling Venom and Green Goblin, which has to be what the next game is about.

Austin Wilkins
via email

As awesome as a cooperative Spider-Man game sounds, our gut tells us Insomniac wouldn't want to alter the formula too much. Adding a second playable character to the mix would dramatically change the experience. We see Insomniac making a sequel that follows the format of the first game, with Peter in the spotlight most of the time, Miles getting a few action-packed Spider-Man sequences, and Mary Jane uncovering clues for a *Daily Bugle* story. We also wouldn't rule out the possibility of other characters being playable, but remember, Peter will likely be dealing with the influence of a symbiote at some point, which could dramatically shake up how he plays. We can't wait to find out what comes next!

Pokémon Go

In my entire history of gaming, which goes back to the original NES, I've spent more time on Pokémon Go than any other game, and I know I'm not alone. My friends play it a ton, and so do millions of other people. I love it, and yet, I don't think I would ever put it on any "Greatest of All Time" lists. Even though it's a little wonky, should it be held in that regard? Does the experience it delivers raise it above its gameplay limitations?

Clint Soderbergh
via email

Pokémon Go is a game changer, and we feel it does deserve to be on "Greatest of All Time" lists for its unique approach and staying power. Developer Niantic can also be applauded for expanding the scope of the game over the years. There's plenty to do now, and yet it still maintains that focus of being able to accomplish what you need to in the time it takes to stand in a Starbucks line.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Content Vs.Quality

I just completed Wasteland 3 on Xbox One and let me tell you … what a ride! Very few games get storytelling just right to where you become emotionally attached to the characters. Red Dead Redemption, Final Fantasy, and The Walking Dead are a few I can quickly think of. It was amazing how I was held accountable for the decisions I made from beginning to end, and the ending I received actually made me want to play again to change some things.

But, and this is a huge but, the game was so buggy. I don't know if I can tolerate another playthrough! I have heard people complain about games being buggy to the point that they wanted to quit, but I had never experienced that in a game up until now. I won't go into the million ways the console version of this game makes me want to pull my hair out; if you've played it then you know. It actually saddens me a bit. I want to say this is the best game I have played all year but I can't. I want to give this game a 10 out of 10 but I won't, off of principle alone. I want to do another playthrough, but unfortunately my sanity says no. Hopefully future DLC or the next iteration will correct some of the issues plaguing this one. I want to remember Wasteland 3 for only the great things it did … unfortunately I can't.

G. Elie
via email

Most of us have had to redo a part of a game because progress was upended by a bug. When the glitches keep coming, that ends up being as big of a takeaway from the experience as the story or gameplay. Developers have the ability to patch games to remove those frustrations, but some don't. We're hoping inXile Entertainment fixes some of the mistakes you encountered so you can go back for the second playthrough with less interruptions.

NINTENDO SWITCH

The Last Generation?

My friends keep saying PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X are going to be the last consoles Sony and Microsoft release. Is this true? Given the amount of hype that is out there for both, why would they not want to continue selling hardware? It seems like that business is booming, one of the few that is during the pandemic.

Kevin Wylde
Oakland, CA

Your friends are likely looking at cloud gaming and how Sony and Microsoft are both releasing games on different machines. The hope is that people can play games whenever they want on whatever device they have. We'll likely see first-party games on more machines over time, but that doesn't mean we won't see a PlayStation 6, 7, or 8. As long as there is a big demand for consoles, we're sure Sony and Microsoft will continue delivering them. And don't forget about Nintendo. We have a feeling this Willy Wonka-like company will never stop creating devices that reinvent the medium in mind-blowing ways. That's what Nintendo does.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

Am I the only one that remembers Advent Rising. It may just be nostalgia, but I remember that game having promise. Prove me wrong or right please!

Advent Rising ended on a cliffhanger and was the first chapter of a planned trilogy. The next two games never happened, which may be a blessing in disguise, as Donald Mustard, the game's director, went on to be one of the creative forces behind Fornite's battle-royale mode.

When I saw Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana didn't make your list of best JRPG's of the generation I became physically sick. Actually, I'm exaggerating but I was pretty disappointed. Almost everyone who has played the game absolutely loved it, so underrated.

Game Informer's Kimberley Wallace enjoyed the game and gave it a respectable 8.25 out of 10 review score, but didn't feel it was a defining RPG of this generation. To each their own.

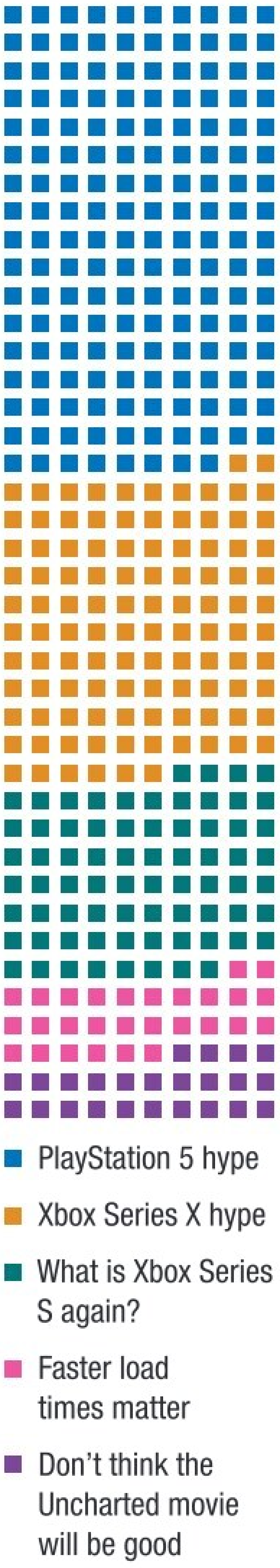
Best Comment:

"I tried to pre-order PlayStation 5 like 500 times, but was denied so I got a Switch instead. It's awesome!"

Question Of The Month:

What kinds of video game collectibles are you into?

DISCO MADE ME DO IT



Pre-Order Plans

Last month we asked our readers if they pre-ordered Play-Station 5 or Xbox Series X/S. Here's what they had to say…

I'm a PlayStation guy, and while hyped for PS5, there is no way I would pre-order. The first wave of consoles of a new generation always seem to be less like a fully polished production, and more like a pre-production, post prototype. By the three-month mark, there is usually a different model, or at least some hardware tweaks that could make an earlier adopter wish they had waited. Plus, the PS4 will have some overlap, and I need a better TV.

JINXnocturnal
via email

Nothing has really caught my interest for either of the platforms. But I think I might go with PS5 just because I'm probably gonna regret later on … and Deathloop looks pretty cool.

Eli Medina
Raleigh, NC

I ordered both the PS5 and the Xbox Series X. To be honest, I bought Xbox for the power, and the minimalist design itself, because as of right now, the games are not what have me interested. Xbox needs to step up and get more games out. The PS5 on the other hand, I bought only for the games (and because I've been a Sony fanboy since the PS3). If I can say it straight up, Sony has been in control of the exclusives market for a long, long time, churning out quality games, based on licensed properties, or new IPs. In the end, it doesn't come down to the power or performance. We buy consoles for games, and so far, Sony has me hooked. Xbox still can get me on their side, should they actually produce something good with the acquisition of Bethesda Softworks.

Aditya Sivaram
Chennai, India

Yep, I managed to get hold of a PS5 on the morning of release here in the UK. Luckily, while I was at work, my fiancé was set up with Amazon UK and a few other sites I saw were planning pre-orders. She managed to bag me a disc-drive version. I'm just looking forward to having a new machine to play with. Miles Morales and Assasins Creed Valhalla are on pre-order!

Jamie Davies
Wales, UK

Game Prices

I know inflation hits most things and that video game prices probably should have gone up from the base $59.99 model a long time ago, but taking a chance on something that is $69.99 is a bit bigger of a pill to swallow. I think video games are going to be hurt by the price hike that we're seeing on some next-generation titles like NBA 2K21. Would games be better off going cheaper to something like $39.99 with the hope that the lower price reaches far more people?

Giancarlo Aaron
Harpers Ferry, WV

It's funny that you bring up a 2K sports game because Sega tried this concept with ESPN NFL 2K5, releasing it for just $19.99 as a way to compete with EA's Madden NFL. The move worked, forcing EA to drop Madden NFL's price to $29.95. In the months that followed, however, EA signed an exclusive agreement with the NFL, which cut Sega's 2K series out of the picture entirely. As game-development prices continue to trend upward, so will the costs to the gamer. The entry price point is only part of the picture now. Many companies are favoring free-to-play options with optional (and often desirable) costs baked in.

From Game to Screen

A physical version of Cal Kestis' lightsaber from Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order will soon be available for purchase at Disney's Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge park. It got me thinking, do you think we'll see Cal in a live-action movie or television series? I think he's the only character that could seamlessly make the leap since Respawn modeled his look after actor Cameron Monaghan. He could easily reprise his role if this opportunity arose.

Darth Williamson
Marfa, TX

If Disney and Lucasfilm create a new live-action story set shortly after the events of *Revenge of the Sith*, Cal could be in play, and we'd love to see Monaghan bring him to life again. We doubt we've seen the last of this character in video games. If we had to guess, Respawn is likely working on a sequel with Monaghan returning.

WINNER

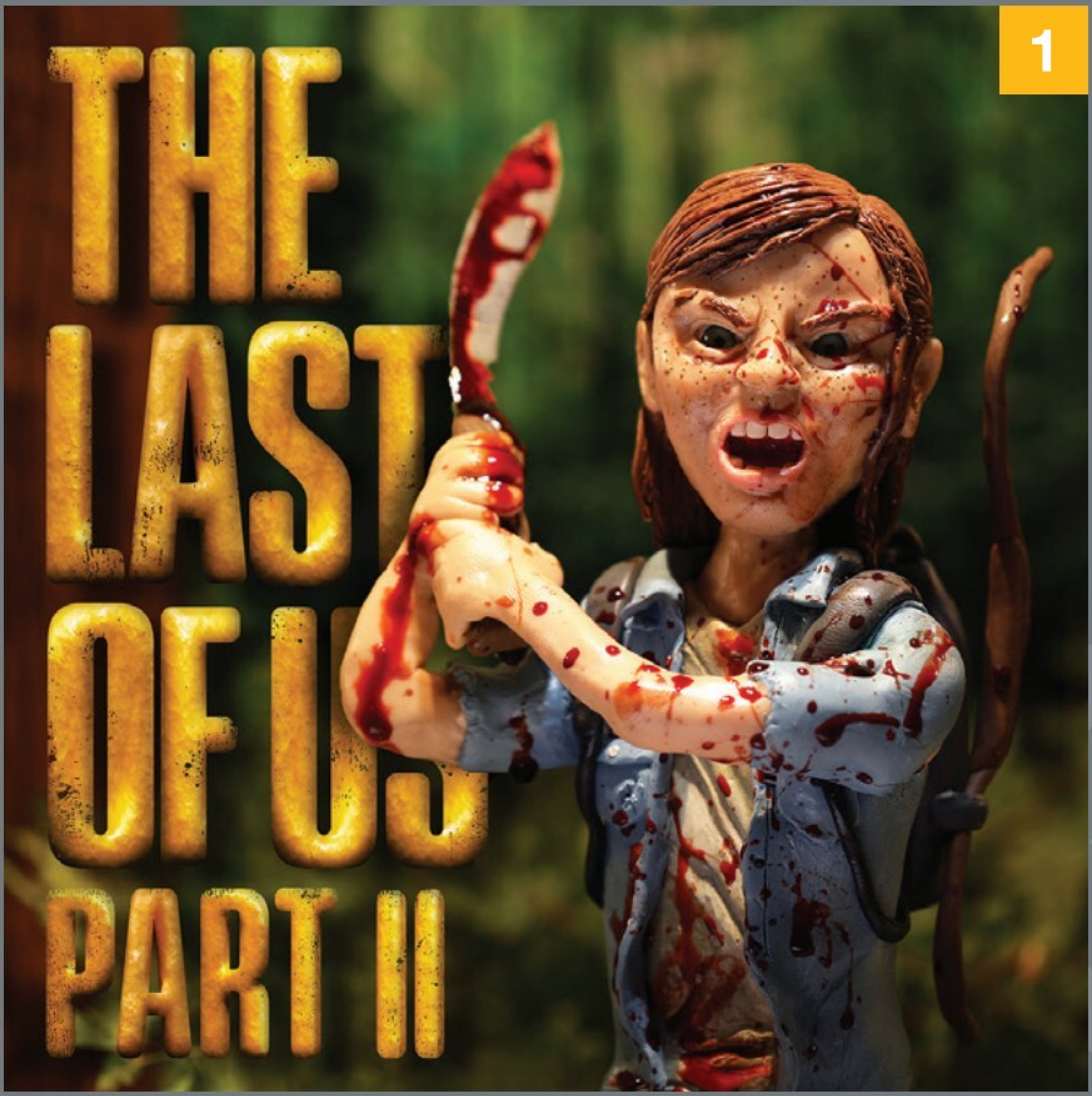
1 Trent Shy
This would make a great Christmas ornament! On second thought ...

2 Vic Hollins
That kind of extensive ink must have set Princess Zelda back at least a few blue rupees.

3 Brianna Y. Rivera
Amaterasu: We know you're a god and all, but you're going to need to wipe those paws off before coming inside.

4 Kathleen Vega, Age 9
Even baby lumas need hugs from time to time.

5 Jessica Osborne
Poison Ivy's got this under control, or at least she does until the zombies enlist Solomon Grundy.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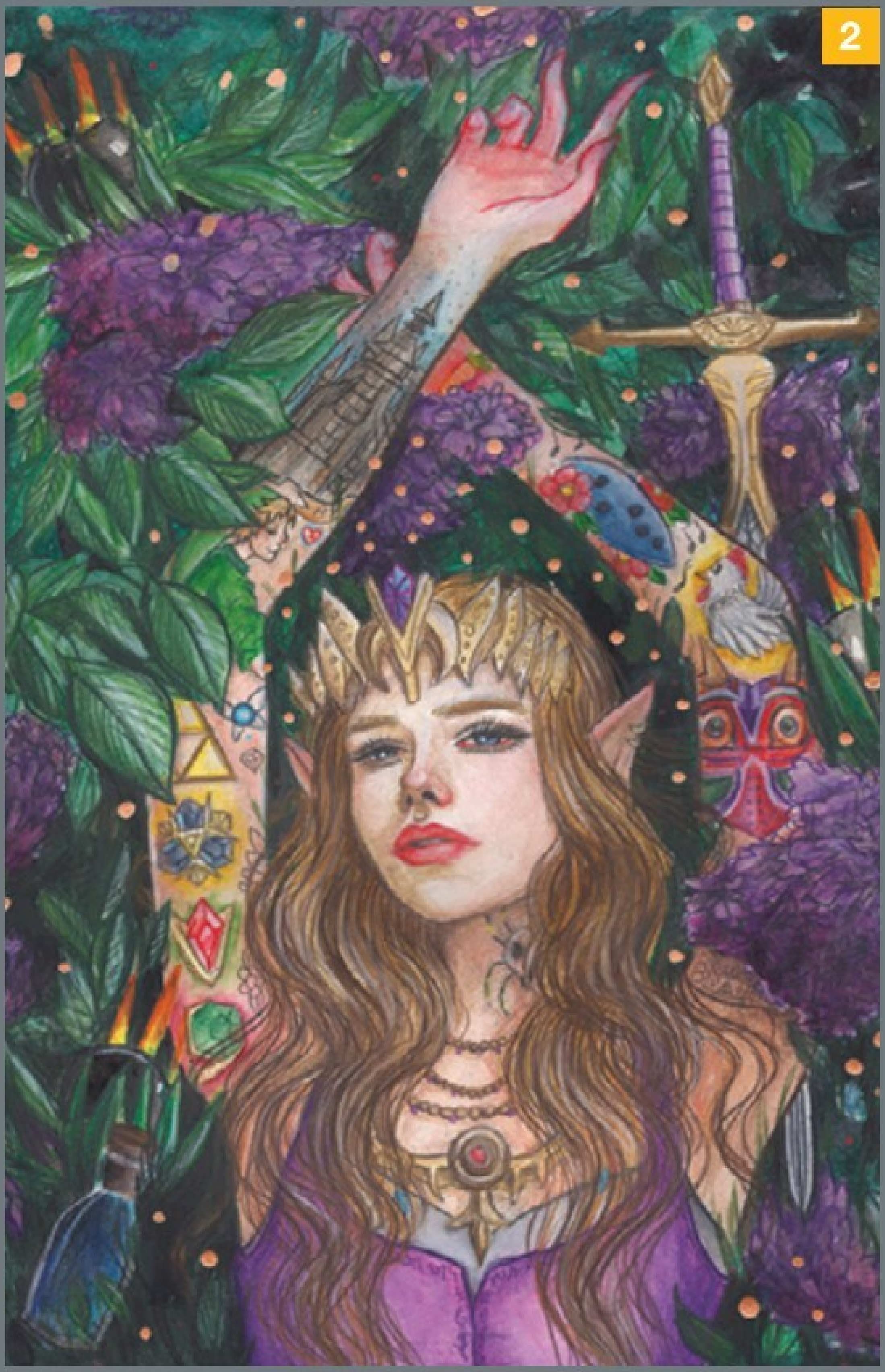
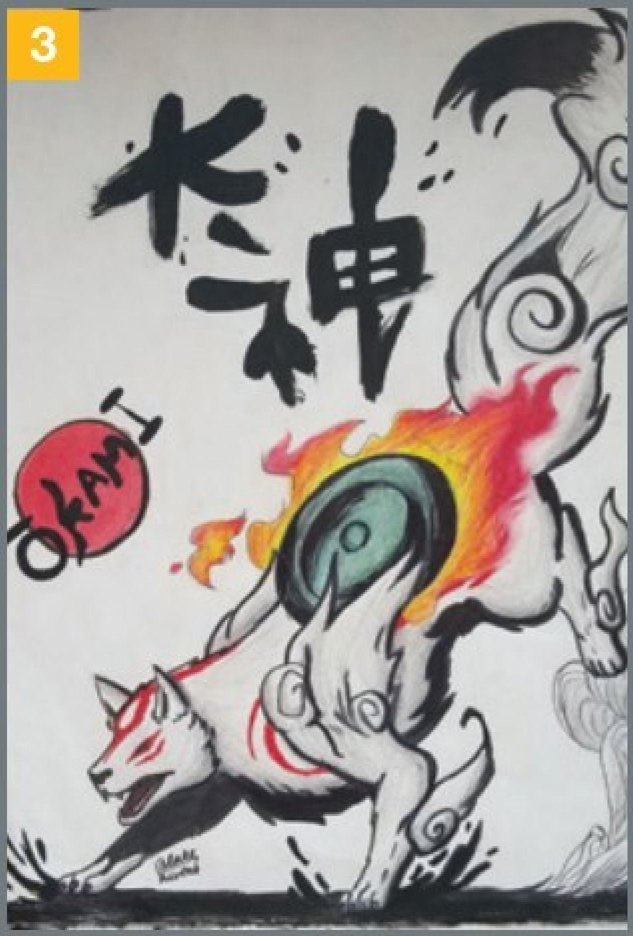
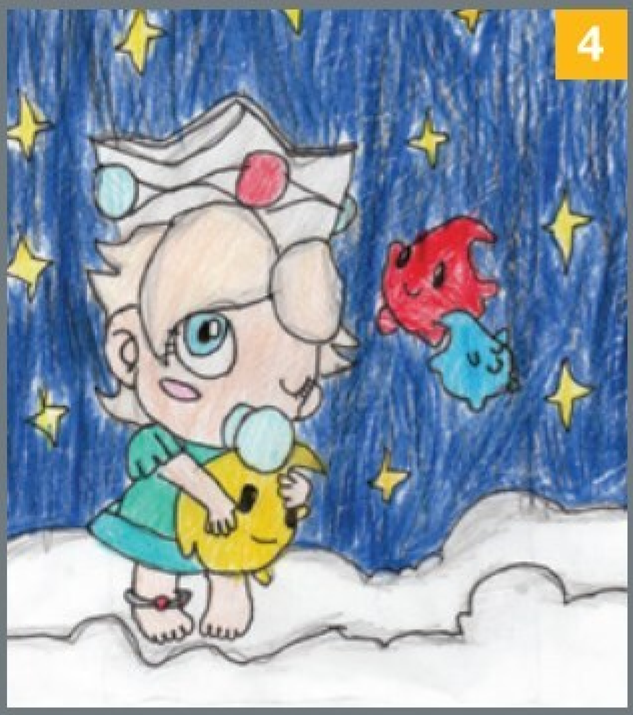
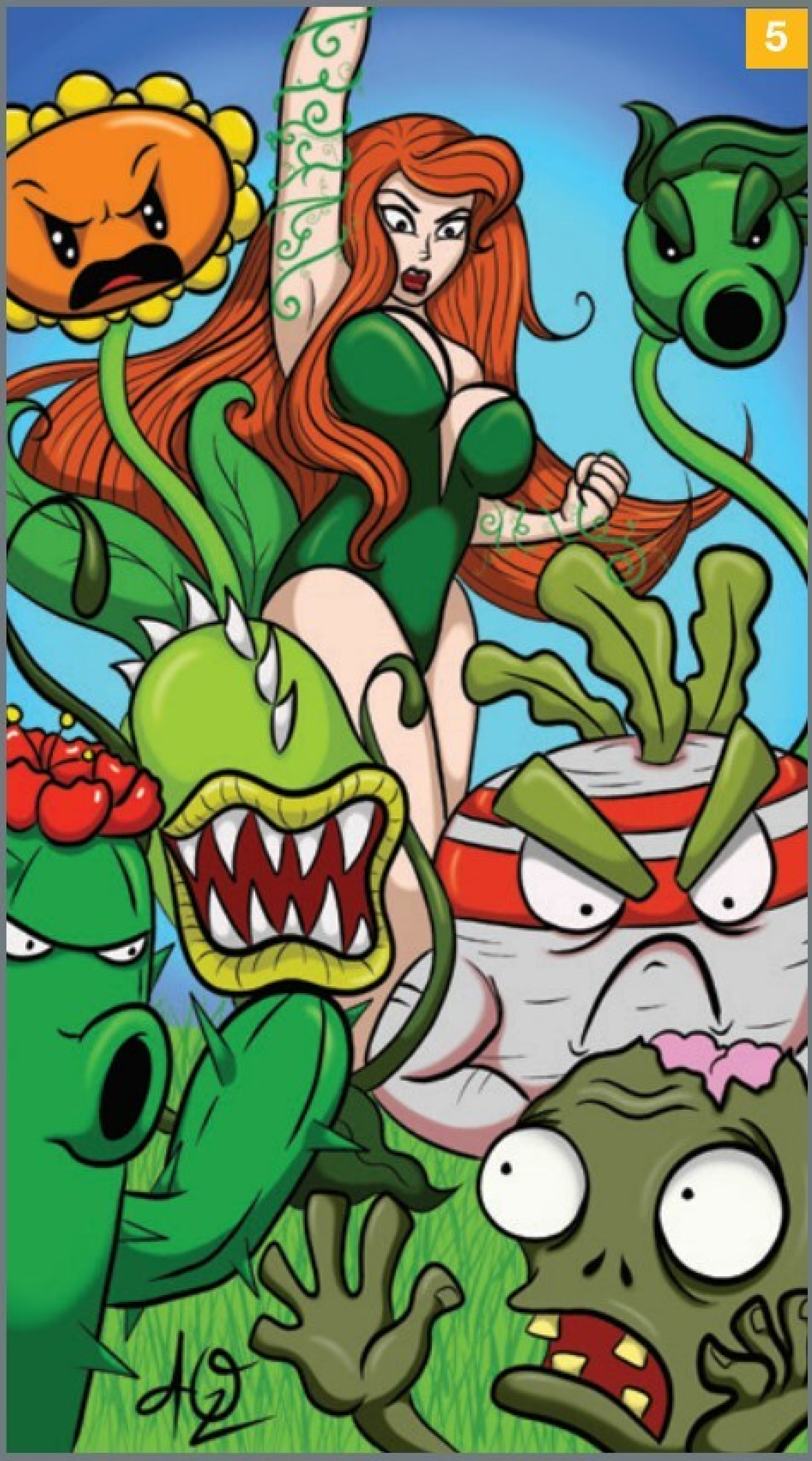
THE LAST OF US PART II









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Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

NEXT-GEN *Becomes* NEW-GEN

The latest consoles from Microsoft and Sony have finally arrived, heralding a new era in gaming. Both machines boast incredible speed, gorgeous graphics, and slick interfaces. With digital and physical media versions available for both, the new generation offers a more flexible approach to gaming and buying than ever before. But in a year of dramatic upheaval and uncertainty, it's fair to ask which new platform is right for you – or even whether it's worth it to become an early adopter of either. Read ahead for our complete hardware reviews of the new consoles, and decide for yourself whether now is the time to upgrade.

THE PLAYSTATION 5 REVIEW

Sony's next-gen machine offers deep immersion, flexibility in use, and lightning-fast speed

by Matt Miller

HARDWARE AND FORM FACTOR

Most mainstream entertainment tech opts for a low-profile presentation, with subdued lines and shapes meant to blend into the background. That's even been true for earlier iterations of PlayStation consoles. The PS5 breaks that mold, with sleek, curved forms, and an overpowering presence – less a tech box, and more a billionaire's yacht.

The PlayStation 5 is a beast in size – the largest home console ever – at over 15 inches in height, more than 10 inches in depth, and 4 inches wide, with the standard edition. The digital edition drops some mass and width without the disc drive. Rather than attempt to diminish the bulk, the designers have added curves and extended wings on both sides that lend yet more flair and size. When active, the operating lights shine outward with enough power to illuminate several feet in an otherwise dark room.

An included stand can be attached in either vertical or horizontal orientation, communicating a vague illusion that the machine is floating in space. That same stand is required to keep the PlayStation 5 steady and level; its oblong lines simply won't sit flat without support. When the stand accentuates the already prodigious size, the PS5 can't help but dominate your entertainment center.

I find the overall design ostentatious. As an object in a living space, it draws the eye and demands you notice it, and there's no denying its striking presence. For many, that stylized and aggressive form may be a plus, recalling recent years of ever-more colorful and light-up PC gaming rigs. For my own tastes, the shape of the box defies the understated qualities I've often liked in Sony consoles. At the same time, I'm happy that the PS5 won't be drawing attention for the sounds it produces. Sony's new flagship runs games whisper-quiet, and remains near-silent even when playing a UHD Blu-ray in the disc drive.

The PS5 offers a generous set of up-to-date ports, including a front-side USB Type-A and Type-C port, and two Super-Speed USB Type-A ports on the rear – ideal for data transfer. That's in addition to the HDMI out, capable of supporting up to 8K and variable refresh rate TVs, if you happen to be that far ahead in the monitor-quality rat race. The expected Ethernet socket is present, and the PS5 supports Bluetooth 5.1 and Wi-Fi capability. Unfortunately, there's no dedicated optical out, which is a disappointment for users with particular home setups. The AC-In is notable only in that the PS5 features no external brick – simply a standard power cord.

From the outside, the PlayStation 5 is big, attractive, and showy. If it had legs, it would swagger. But it's possible the bluster is warranted, once you power it up and see what this monster is capable of doing.

Games Library

While separate from an evaluation of the hardware, knowing the available games on the console is an essential tool in making an informed purchase. Sony offers a paid subscription service called PS Now with access to several hundred PS4, PS3, and PS2 games, and a separate pay service called PlayStation Plus, which provides access to online multiplayer, as well as a small selection of monthly games that are yours to keep for as long as you're a member. PlayStation Plus members on PS5 also have access to the new PlayStation Plus Collection – a curated set of greatest hits from the PS4 generation, including God of War, Bloodborne, Batman: Arkham Knight, and over a dozen other titles – all without additional cost.

Notable Launch Window Games

- Assassin's Creed Valhalla *(see p. 74)*
- Astro's Playroom *(see p. 76)*
- Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War
- Demon's Souls
- Destiny 2: Beyond Light
- Fortnite
- Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales *(see p. 71)*
- The Pathless *(see p. 73)*
- Watch Dogs: Legion *(see p. 75)*

Notable Games On The Horizon

- Cyberpunk 2077
- Far Cry 6
- Final Fantasy XVI
- Gran Turismo 7
- Hitman 3
- Horizon Forbidden West
- Immortals Fenyx Rising *(see p. 40)*
- Kena: Bridge of Spirits
- Ratchet and Clank: Rift Apart
- Resident Evil Village *(see p. 66)*
- Yakuza: Like A Dragon *(see p. 77)*

PERFORMANCE

Any new console needs to be powerful at launch, as it will have to keep up with ever-growing demands put on it over its lifetime. While it's impossible to predict the computing challenges the PS5 will face in five or even 10 years, the initial release is a remarkably sophisticated and impressive console. The PS5 is so fast that it has the potential to change the way game designers put their games together.

That speed is one of a few especially notable features that set the PS5's performance apart from its predecessor, and which even casual users will likely notice right away. The custom 825GB SSD is larger in storage capacity than the standard PS4, but smaller than the PS4 Pro's 1TB drive. At next-gen game sizes, you will run out of space very quickly. But since the PS5 features easy storage-expansion options using off-market (read: cheap) SSDs, the bigger story is the way the internal solid-state drive helps to speed up information access. Alongside the processing power afforded by the AMD Zen 2 CPU and 16GB GDDR6 Memory, loading times are greatly diminished.

The tech jargon is proven out by the dramatically faster loading I saw across a variety of games. Games built specifically for PS5 loaded far faster; in the new Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, fast travel on the PS5 was near instantaneous. And while the speed improvement was less dramatic on backward-compatible PS4 games, I still found significant improvements in games like Ghost of Tsushima and Days Gone, sometimes halving wait time. Design-wise, play spaces can load in faster, so in games designed for the system, we're likely to see fewer winding tunnels or long elevator rides connecting explorable areas.

Beyond speed, lighting is the next big noticeable upgrade. Ray tracing was not a supported technology on the PS4, but the PS5 makes it a centerpiece. Ray tracing is a rendering technique to create realistic lighting throughout the game worlds we explore by tracking the way that light moves and reflects in an environment. Light is also the way we see everything in a game world, and ray tracing offers the potential for real-time global illumination. Textures in the game world reap the benefits of that realism, from hair and cloth to metal and glass.

Real-time ray tracing is enabled through the powerful GPU, and that same GPU contributes to greatly improved framerates (up to 120 FPS). As monitor/TV tech continues to expand, the PS5's graphical power also enables support for 8K output. At launch, many games support native 4K with HDR. Some games offer a choice of graphical mode, giving the user flexibility to prioritize higher fidelity visuals running at 30 FPS, or greater performance at 60 FPS, but without some graphical upgrades.

The PlayStation 5 also distinguishes itself in the audio department, with a new 3D audio engine that can process many audio sources at once. Experienced through headset use, the impressiveness of the tech is limited by your audiophile tendencies. In early use, the 3D audio effect felt similar to good surround-sound headphones I've used in the past. But with experience, I began to notice the nuances of distance and volume, especially in game environments with a bevy of different sounds. In practical terms, the tech increases immersion by helping you feel like you are in the center of the environment depicted in-game.

Over many hours of playing, I did encounter some performance issues on the PS5, including some game freezes that required software or system restarts. It's difficult at this early juncture to point to software or hardware issues, but it's fair to acknowledge that this new generation has not yet done away with technical hiccups.

Finally, for those who purchase the standard edition of the PS5 (rather than digital), the Ultra HD Blu-ray drive enables double the capacity of the PS4's standard Blu-ray discs, which should be a boon to developers trying to squeeze in more data. More functionally, it means that the PS5 can be a UHD Blu-ray player, showing movies in crystal clarity on your 4K TV.

USER EXPERIENCE

Raw power is great, but the potential can be wasted if the way you interact with the console is tedious. Thankfully, the PlayStation 5 provides a slick dashboard and easy access to the content most users will want, alongside deep customization options and an attractive overall aesthetic.

While the new dashboard has been wholly redesigned, longtime PlayStation users will recognize the legacy of the XrossMediaBar that has long been the basis of organization. Horizontally organized apps are placed under one of two distinct groups – Games and Media – and can be scrolled through left to right. And whether it's a game in your collection or your app library, each entry on that horizontal bar presents a new background splash screen (think game box art), and the option to tap down to explore greater detail. The full-screen art that overtakes each screen is inviting, but I sometimes miss the subtler backdrop screen of the PS4.

A tap of the PlayStation button pulls up a customizable control center – a second horizontal set of icons that represent common tasks. The control center can be tweaked at will, adding and subtracting items you commonly use, which is handy. Do you regularly turn on Spotify to listen to tunes while playing? Check the box to have quick access to Music. Play mostly solo? Get rid of the Game Base icon that governs voice chat and other social features. If you instead play a lot of multiplayer, the Game Base offers expanded party options beyond voice chat, including a quick way to share your screen, so you can watch what your friend is doing in their game, even while you might be playing something else.

The Control Center also provides a quick-select option for accessibility controls; Sony has made major strides to support players with a variety of needs, offering chat transcription, closed captioning, custom controller button assignment, color inversion, and a screen reader to convert onscreen text into spoken word, among other aids. Even if some of these features are dependent on games or apps that support functionality, the ease of access and availability of these and other accessibility features is a great way to make the console a friendly place to game for the widest variety of players.

For any given game, large pop-up cards can be accessed in the hub, and depending on the developer, a variety of neat options are available, including percentage completion of an activity, the ability to jump directly to that activity, and even hint videos. While not every game or activity will include these features, it's a handy set of tools that recognizes the value of your time and your desire to make sure that time is spent in a fun way.

CONTROLLER

If there's a surprise success in the first page of the new-gen console story, it's Sony's DualSense controller. It has rocketed to become my favorite first-party controller ever made, thanks to its attractive design, excellent in-hand feel, and a peerless approach to feedback and motion that must be felt to be believed.

The DualSense abandons the single-color aesthetic that defined previous generations, and opts for a striking two-tone scheme that matches the console. Slightly larger and heavier than the PS4's DualShock 4, the new DualSense feels more solid in-hand than its predecessor, with a gently curved shape that comfortably fits in adult hands.

The real revelation is the novelty of the haptic feedback and adaptive triggers. Dual interior actuators create evocative effects, from the feeling of tiny creatures moving back and forth inside, to a more nuanced sensation of movement and footfalls than older rumble tech could replicate. The adaptive triggers provide resistance and tension for actions like firing a gun or braking a car. In combination, the DualSense fulfills the promise of a controller that genuinely assists immersion in a powerful way.

Only time will tell if the thumbsticks hold up better under strenuous use than the notoriously damage-prone DualShock 4, but my early sense is that the rubber seems sturdy and grippy. The d-pad and face buttons present attractive transparent plastic overlays, lending a 3D effect. The new touchpad features more surface area for swipes and was readily responsive as an input.

A built-in microphone is adequate to the task, allowing audible built-in voice chat (output from the controller speaker) for players who prefer to avoid a dedicated headset, while a standard 3.5mm headphone jack offers support for your preferred headset. A new mute button (with indicator light) is a welcome addition, allowing for quick audio-capture elimination. The integrated controller speaker still frequently feels like a gimmick, but it is easy to turn on and off. The accelerometer and gyroscope are capable, but I've yet to encounter a motion-controlled sequence (PS5 or otherwise) that I wouldn't rather control with a stick.

The new "Create" button replaces "Share," with similar purpose but improved functionality and speed, allowing for screen capturing, as well as video capturing of both recent activity or starting a new manual recording. You also have instant broadcasting options to Twitch or YouTube, once you've linked your accounts. In addition, the Create pop-up menu supports quick tweaking of a number of useful functions, such as whether to capture mic and party audio, or file output format for screens and videos.

Accompanied by a solidly impressive rechargeable battery life of several hours (varying based on usage) featuring an up-to-date USB Type-C connector, the DualSense comes out of the gate as a standout success, and it's one of the big distinguishing features for the PS5.

COMPATIBILITY

With multiple generations of PlayStation hardware behind us, it's challenging to paint a complete picture of what will and won't work on a new system. As a rule, if a particular accessory or game is especially important to you, investigate individually. But there are some general guidelines you can fall back on.

In terms of software, "more than 99%" of PS4 titles should work at launch, according to Sony. Some games (like Ghost of Tsushima) even feature boosted performance. We had good luck in our testing of several first- and third-party games. Unfortunately, PS3 and older games are not backwards compatible.

On the accessory front, specialty peripherals like arcade sticks and flight sticks are compatible with both PS5 and supported PS4 games, and the PS Move and VR Aim controller work with supported PSVR games. DualShock 4 controllers will work on supported PS4 games, but won't work on new PS5 games – those require the new DualSense. And if you use the PlayStation Camera, you'll need to acquire an adaptor, which will be provided free to PSVR users after completing an online form.

Headsets are a more complicated mix. Anything that plugs in via USB or audio jack should work fine, and wireless headsets that use USB adaptors also worked well in our testing. Unfortunately, while the PS5 does support some Bluetooth devices, it does not offer support for Bluetooth headsets – a disappointing omission that feels out of step with the times.

Finally, when considering which model PS5 to purchase, be aware that any older games that you own on physical discs won't work if you opt for the digital edition of the machine.

THE VERDICT

The PlayStation 5 is an incredibly powerful and sophisticated piece of gaming hardware, sometimes virtually eliminating the tedium of loading screens that have plagued console gaming for decades. Games look amazing thanks to new lighting techniques, especially on 4K displays, and a proprietary sound engine ensures an equally arresting aural experience. While its outward aesthetic is attractive, it's also overpowering, and the design won't please everyone. A slick dashboard is easy to use and smartly designed, and values what's important to you, most especially your leisure time. ◆

RELEASE:
November 12

PRICE:
PS5 Standard Edition - $499
PS5 Digital Edition - $399

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THE XBOX SERIES X/S REVIEW

The next generation of Xbox offers two speedy, smooth options that focus on iteration over innovation

by Brian Shea

HARDWARE AND FORM FACTOR

Upon unboxing the Xbox Series X, one thing is immediately apparent: Xbox's new flagship console is massive. Resembling a PC tower more than a traditional video game console, its nearly 12-inch height wouldn't be such a barrier for entertainment configurations if it weren't for its approximately 6-inch depth and width as well. With those dimensions, players with horizontal-oriented slots in their entertainment systems for hardware like Blu-ray players, cable boxes, and previous video game consoles will likely have issues fitting the Xbox Series X within their existing configuration; the only place I could fit it into my entertainment setup was on the stand behind the TV. The less expensive, disc-less Series S, on the other hand, is the smallest Xbox ever produced. The console weighs just 4.3 pounds versus the 9.8 pounds of the Series X, and can easily fit anywhere your Xbox One already fits.

Both consoles feature an ethernet port, three USB ports (two in the back, one in the front), an HDMI port, the power connection, and a storage expansion slot designed for proprietary external SSD expansions (more on that later). Sadly, Xbox Series X/S removes the optical audio port of previous generations. However, to the delight of Xbox One owners who are sick of the massive power brick, both the Xbox Series X and Series S eliminate the giant block in favor of a standard power cord. Each version also includes an HDMI 2.1 cable, which allows for high-speed transmission of data between the console and screen, capable of hitting up to 120 frames-per-second performance. However, you do need a monitor or television with a matching 2.1 port to take advantage of what it offers. Despite the power both consoles deliver, the Series X/S is whisper quiet, even when the Series X is playing discs. Not only that, but even after extended playtimes of new-gen software, both systems do a good job of regulating heat thanks to ample ventilation.

Perhaps the biggest differentiator of the two consoles from a hardware perspective is in how the Xbox Series X has a physical disc drive, while the Series S does not. Whether or not this is a big deal is strictly based on your individual gaming tendencies, but not having a disc drive obviously means you cannot play disc-based games or disc-based movies. For those who like physical media, that component of the Series S could be a deal-breaker.

Games Library

One of Xbox's main attractions over the last several years has been Xbox Game Pass, a subscription service that lets you download from more than 100 games as a part of a single subscription cost. In addition to various third-party publisher titles, including triple-A and indie games, Xbox Game Pass also includes all first-party Xbox Game Studios releases on day one. This means Game Pass includes titles from Bethesda, 343 Industries, Obsidian, The Coalition, and more at launch for no additional charge. Not just that, but Electronic Arts recently added its extensive library of EA Play titles to the Game Pass subscription, further bolstering what is already the best value in gaming today.

Even if you don't have a Game Pass subscription, here's what you can expect to play on Xbox Series X/S at launch and in the future.

Notable Launch Window Games

- **Assassin's Creed Valhalla** ***(see p. 74)***
- **Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War**
- **Destiny 2: Beyond Light**
- **Fortnite**
- **Gears Tactics**
- **Tetris Effect: Connected**
- **Watch Dogs: Legion** ***(see p. 75)***
- **Yakuza: Like a Dragon** ***(see p. 77)***

Notable Games On The Horizon

- **12 Minutes**
- **CrossfireX**
- **Cyberpunk 2077**
- **Everwild**
- **Fable**
- **Far Cry 6**
- **Halo Infinite**
- **Hitman 3**
- **Immortals Fenyx Rising** ***(see p. 40)***
- **The Medium** ***(see p. 52)***
- **Resident Evil Village** ***(see p. 66)***
- **Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2**

PERFORMANCE

Regardless of whether you choose the Series X or Series S, the new consoles shine when it comes to performance. Thanks to the Xbox Velocity Architecture, which includes a custom NVME solid-state storage drive, both new Xbox models deliver marked improvements over last gen, particularly in how fast games load. This performance upgrade is most impressive in open-world games, with backward-compatible titles loading in a fraction of the time. New-gen games with open worlds like Yakuza: Like a Dragon and Assassin's Creed Valhalla load faster than other games featuring big worlds on last-gen consoles. This is the biggest advantage I noticed over last-gen hardware; after spending weeks with the new consoles, I find it extremely difficult to return to my Xbox One X.

Additionally, Xbox Series X/S delivers myriad tweaks to how you experience your games, including multiple latency-lowering features and various ways to optimize the use of the system's memory to provide more detailed textures faster. Players can expect less screen-tearing due to the variable refresh rate, and more realistic worlds and characters due to hardware-accelerated ray tracing. On top of that, spatial sound and implemented acoustic models provide a better audio experience than any Xbox before it.

Unfortunately, both consoles still contain too little storage. The Xbox Series X features a 1TB SSD, while the Series S possesses a paltry 512GB. The plus side to the Series S's low storage is that games downloaded to the system do not include 4K textures, so the files are smaller. However, with game sizes growing bigger each year and updates ballooning the sizes of the files, your choice comes down to either keeping just a few triple-A games on your SSD or purchasing the pricey proprietary external storage.

You can use a third-party external HDD to store games, but you can only play backward compatible games from it and it won't achieve the same performance or speed of the internal SSD. If you want extra space for Xbox Series X/S-optimized games, you need to pick up the proprietary expansion cards. The current one, from Seagate, adds an extra terabyte of SSD storage and operates at the same levels as the internal SSD, but it sets you back $220.

The Xbox Series X is an absolute powerhouse, with 12 TFLOPs of GPU power that works in conjunction with 16GB of GDDR6 320-bit memory including 10GB of GPU-optimized memory that works to prevent bottlenecks. The result is the ability for Xbox Series X titles to reach 4K resolution at up to 120 frames-per-second. Meanwhile, Xbox Series S has significantly less processing power, with 4 TFLOPs of GPU power that works with 10GB of GDDR6 128-bit memory. Thankfully, the Series S can still reach up to 120 frames-per-second, but its resolution tops out at 1440p.

Thanks to this hardware, gameplay is silky smooth with minimal pop-in. Games feel responsive and perform well, offering stable framerates and crisp visuals. While there may not be a ton of games that you can't also buy on Xbox One, my time with both the Xbox Series X and Xbox Series S tells me that the performance of these new systems deliver substantial quality-of-life improvements that make it easily the best way to experience any Xbox game.

USER EXPERIENCE

Although the dashboard is largely unchanged from the Xbox One generation, the improvements come from how quickly everything loads and how smooth it is to navigate. The speed at which you can bounce between screens and menus is impressive, but the biggest step up from last gen is in how you can swap games and pick up where you left off.

The new Quick Resume feature allows you to jump between multiple games fast by leaving titles in suspended states. Using this feature, I alternated between completing contracts in Hitman 2 and wandering around the Oldest House in Control, then switched over to Overwatch for a few matches before returning right where I left off with Hitman 2 all within a few seconds. Obviously, for titles like Overwatch and Destiny 2, that time you out of the server for inactivity, you won't be able to suspend their states without being dropped, but being able to jump between games without any load screens or lengthy menus is incredibly convenient.

In addition, the Xbox Home and collection screens have been iterated on many times over the course of the previous generation, and as a result, the interface feels more user-friendly. Not only is the Home screen extremely customizable and reactive to how you play, surfacing the games and apps you most recently used, but you can pin games, groups, and apps to the screen so you can make it as organized, social, or game-focused as you want. In the collection screen, clear categories like "Xbox 360 Games" and "Optimized For Series X/S" help you find games you own or have access to thanks to Xbox Live Gold or Xbox Game Pass, as well as myriad sorting and filtering options to locate the game or app you want without much hassle.

From an accessibility standpoint, Microsoft carries over its progress from Xbox One in this important area. Players can remap the controller, enable copilot mode to let two people play as one, and take advantage of accessibility options like narrator, magnifier, game transcription, and different contrast settings. Additionally, the widely praised Xbox Adaptive Controller is compatible with the Xbox Series X/S, giving players who need additional accessibility options even more flexibility.

COMPATIBILITY

While everyone is looking forward to the new games they'll play on these systems at launch and in the future, many of us have accumulated impressive collections of games we already love. With that in mind, Xbox did an outstanding job of making sure almost anything you enjoyed doing on Xbox One can be done on Xbox Series X/S.

It all starts with software compatibility. Sure, all your favorite streaming apps make the leap to this generation, but outside of a handful of Kinect titles, every game that runs on Xbox One can run on Xbox Series X/S from day one. That means that in addition to the vast library of Xbox One titles, you can also access the backwards-compatible-enabled Xbox 360 and original Xbox library. I loved turning my Xbox Series X on for the first time, long before any new-gen games had arrived, and instantly having access to the large library of Xbox games I already own. Most people don't buy new hardware to play old games, but when the games I already know and love benefit from the better hardware (including better framerate, higher resolution, smoother gameplay, better load times, and added HDR), it's nice to not have to start from scratch. Additionally, if there is an Xbox Series X/S version of a game you own on Xbox One, developers can utilize Smart Delivery to get you the best version of the game on the console you're using at no additional cost.

Not only do all of your games and apps make the generational leap, but Xbox took things a step further: Every accessory you own for Xbox One automatically works with Xbox Series X/S. I was able to pair my third-party wireless Xbox One headset and Elite Series 2 controller as if they were made for Series X/S. Even the Rock Band 4 USB legacy adapter plugged in and worked immediately. Upgrading to a new console is always expensive, and this level of peripheral compatibility means I don't have to worry about buying a second controller for my player 2 or a new headset on top of the several-hundred-dollar investment. Unfortunately, Xbox Series X/S follows in the footsteps of Xbox One in not supporting Bluetooth headsets.

I was impressed with how simple moving my library to the new consoles proved to be. I had the option to either redownload them or save my bandwidth by simply plugging in the external HDD I was using on my Xbox One X. Once connected, the Xbox Series X/S immediately populated my games library with the titles on the external hard drive. It was largely a smooth process, but moving Rock Band 4 with my more-than 1,500 DLC songs across storage units did temporarily bring the system to its knees.

The Xbox Series X/S is the most compatible console we've likely ever seen. By veering close to PC-like compatibility, Xbox delivers on its platform uniformity goal. Xbox has not only set the standard for compatibility in an industry with a spotty track record, but it has thrown down the gauntlet and brought an extremely consumer-friendly approach.

CONTROLLER

Coming off one of the greatest console controllers ever made with the Xbox One, Xbox chose to not reinvent the wheel with its next gamepad. The Xbox Series X/S wireless controller largely keeps the same form factor and functionality as its predecessor, but with a couple of refinements.

The Xbox Series X/S controller's most noticeable addition is the new Share button. This button, located in the middle of the controller's face, offers easier capture functionality. In the Xbox One generation, to capture a screenshot or record gameplay footage, you needed to press the Home button, wait for the side-menu to load, then press X or Y to capture. Unfortunately, some games automatically entered the pause menu if you hit the Home button, making it difficult to capture the screenshot you wanted, while others kept the action going, leading to more than a few in-game deaths on my end. Thankfully, this controller's Share button makes that a thing of the past. Now, you capture a screenshot by quickly pressing the button or record the last chunk of gameplay with a long press of the button. I love being able to quickly capture and share my gameplay screenshots and videos without throwing the brakes on the action or diverting my attention for more than a split-second.

The Xbox Series X/S controller also swaps out the plus-sign d-pad of last-gen for a hybrid multidirectional d-pad for increased versatility. I'm pleasantly surprised by how precise the new d-pad feels; playing side-scrolling games like Sonic Mania or Dead Cells felt as great as ever, and the d-pad has a satisfying click to it.

The controller features improved grip on the handles, triggers, and bumpers, plus a 3.5mm headset jack, and a USB-C connection port. Unfortunately, the controller still uses two double-A batteries, which feels downright archaic in 2020. I don't expect a stock controller to have the awesome rechargeable battery of the premium Xbox Elite Wireless Controller Series 2, but it's annoying to have to keep double-A batteries nearby at all times. If you want to avoid regularly swapping out batteries, Xbox does sell official rechargeable battery packs. If you'd prefer to stick with your existing Xbox One controller, you can use that without losing any functionality aside from the Share button.

THE VERDICT

The Xbox Series X and Xbox Series S introduce superb quality-of-life improvements like Quick Resume and reduced load times over Xbox One or even Xbox One X, but don't expect a markedly different or revolutionary leap forward when you first power on the system. If you're simply looking for the best place to play your library of past, present, and future Xbox games, look no further than Xbox Series X/S. ◆

RELEASE:
November 10

PRICE:
Xbox Series X - $499
Xbox Series S - $299

B+

WHICH CONSOLE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Now that we've delivered our comprehensive thoughts on the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, it's time to answer the most important question

by Brian Shea & Matt Miller

With both PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S available, it's time to decide which new-gen console is right for you. After spending weeks with PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, we feel good about the starting point for this generation and its ability to elevate our gaming experience. However, a few differentiating factors could make one or the other a better fit for your situation.

As you read on the preceding pages, both consoles are physically large and offer substantial performance boosts over their predecessors, slashing load times while adding processing power, audio improvements, and features like ray tracing. With a strong emphasis on getting the player into the game as fast as possible, the two consoles accomplish this in different ways. Xbox Series X/S's Quick Resume feature lets you suspend several games and bounce between them, picking right up where you left off. This means if you're the kind of person to play through multiple games in parallel, Xbox's approach could save you a ton of time. Meanwhile, PlayStation 5 uses Activity Cards, which let you load directly into the mode or lobby you want to enter, skipping the menu song and dance.

As for the piece of hardware you'll find in your grip so often, you really can't go wrong with the controllers of this new generation. If you, like us, think the Xbox One controller is among the greatest ever released, you won't be disappointed by the Xbox Series X/S controller, which largely keeps the same form factor, but adds an easier way to capture screenshots and footage with an added button. However, the PlayStation 5 DualSense turns the traditional DualShock design on its head, adding haptic vibration and innovative triggers that can be tuned by developers to behave differently, and feels especially innovative.

While it's not technically a part of the hardware, the games available on these systems inevitably play a massive role in your console-buying decision. There's no denying PlayStation has done an outstanding job cultivating a terrific catalog of established and proven exclusive franchises. With a launch lineup that includes Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales and Demon's Souls, and 2021 offering new entries in the God of War and Horizon series, PlayStation shows no signs of slowing down. Xbox promises new releases in franchises like Halo, Hellblade, and Fable in the future, plus games from the bevy of studios it has acquired over the last several years. However, while those developers are full of talent and potential, the future projects are more uncertain than PlayStation's at this time.

One area where Xbox has the definite advantage is the Game Pass subscription model. The Xbox team has spent the last few years investing heavily in this service, putting blockbuster triple-A titles, promising indie games, and all first-party releases on Game Pass. Simply put, Xbox Game Pass is the best value in gaming and is becoming increasingly vital to the Xbox ecosystem. PlayStation 5 has some comparable services like PlayStation Now and the PlayStation Plus Collection, but as of this writing, those focus on games from previous generations, and PlayStation has not demonstrated the commitment Xbox has with Game Pass.

Compatibility was a key point heading into this generation, with nearly all last-gen games working on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. However, Xbox took things a step further, making it so all Xbox One-compatible peripherals work on the new systems, bringing forward all our peripherals in addition to the games. PlayStation doesn't deliver that level of hardware compatibility.

If you've embraced digital, both PlayStation and Xbox offer cheaper consoles that forego the disc drive. While the PlayStation 5 Digital Edition has all of the same bells and whistles of the standard PS5 (minus the disc drive), the Xbox Series S loses a large amount of the Series X's processing power, causing it to drop its maximum resolution to 1440p. If you're not concerned about playing physical media of any kind, these consoles are good options available at a cheaper price.

We can dissect every component of these consoles, but which console wins out could boil down to two factors: what your friends choose and what you're already invested in. With near-full backwards compatibility, it could be a painful proposition to leave your entire catalog behind to jump to the other side. Similarly, while crossplay between competing platforms is becoming more prevalent in popular multiplayer games, it makes more sense to play on the same platform as your group of friends to ensure you'll be able to enjoy all of this generation's games together.

Regardless of which console you choose, we have ample reason to be excited for the future. As we move into the next generation of video games, both PlayStation and Xbox have provided superb starting points. Now that we have the new consoles, all we can do is patiently await the amazing games that will come to define this generation even more than the hardware itself. ◆

JUMPING HIGHER

How the new console power allowed NBA 2K to take its game to a whole new level

New tech brings new opportunities, allowing developers to re-envision how they approach games. For long-established franchises like NBA 2K, it presents the perfect time to look toward evolving and capitalizing on this power. Visual Concepts is constantly trying new things, whether it is enhancing sports storytelling or increasing the amount of customization. "As a team, we are very ambitious with our ideas and designs, often making decisions that feel more at home in other types of games, rather than sports games," says Visual Concepts executive producer Erick Boenisch. "What we have learned over the years is our fanbase is very hungry for evolution in the sports genre, and that is something we are going to continue delivering for this whole new generation of sports fans."

With NBA 2K21, the developers didn't shy away from the challenge of leveraging the new console power – and at launch, to boot. We chatted with Boenisch to learn how the new console capabilities are changing the way we play. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

GRAPHICAL EDGE

NBA 2K games have always wowed with their cutting-edge graphics and presentation, but the next-gen trailers showed off gameplay with realistic dribbling, swift movement, and accurate positioning, turning more heads than ever. It felt like watching an actual NBA game, displaying the graphical jump we all wanted to see. "Visual Concepts has always been a studio on the forefront of graphics technically, and NBA 2K21 is no exception," Boesnich says. Expect the graphical edge to be seen in a variety of places, such as lighting, textures, physics, and animations.

This new power also extends to capturing the liveliness of the arena after tip-off. "Powered by our [new] Lower Bowl feature, every arena now has 150-plus real-time actors who are always moving about, performing their jobs," Boenisch says. "Everything is completely organic. You will see cheerleaders streaming out of the tunnels during a timeout as they run on the court to perform their routines. You will see security guards flood the court during stoppages of play. Mop boys get up from their seats to clean the floors and return the mop to its resting location. Even fans can be seen coming and going from their seats during games, as you would expect in real life. The fact that everything happens as you would expect, as if you were truly attending an NBA game, is something that has to be experienced to truly understand."

FASTER LOADS DO MORE THAN YOU THINK

You're right to think that Sony and Microsoft have been banking on faster loading times to be a big selling factor, but this feature is about more than just convenience. The performance from an SSD allows developers to add things they never would have been able to before. Previously, a big knock at the series was the load times for getting into modes and games. "NBA 2K21 is a game that relies heavily on the fast loading of data," Boenisch says. "Whether that fast loading comes from needing to quickly load two full teams

of hi-res players, their uniforms, and an arena, or the need to load and stream our vast and impressive The City [more information below], it has provided us with design opportunities that would have resulted in too frustrating of a game experience (or an experience not possible at all!) on previous consoles."

Boenisch has been with Visual Concepts for more than 18 years now, and he has been playing NBA 2K since its inception. But nothing prepared him for what a difference-maker it would be to have a game built from the ground up for a device with an SSD. "The first time I was transported from our team-select to playing a game at tip-off within two seconds, literally two seconds, my views on next-generation gaming were forever changed," he says.

UPPING THE DESIGN AND GAMEPLAY

The goal with every entry is to improve, but coming into a new generation, you want to make an impression and set the tone for future entries. The new console power and advanced tech allowed Visual Concepts to rethink its gameplay and rebuild some of its systems in exciting ways.

As NBA 2K fans know, the series has grown to be more of a social experience in recent years with online modes including The Neighborhood, where players can hop into casual park games. Visual Concepts decided to once again go big. Forget a neighborhood with shops and pick-up games, how about a whole city? "The additional power of the next-gen consoles afforded us the opportunity to create a truly immersive world that allows for a significantly larger number of players to cohabitate in together as they play through their RPG experience in The City," Boenisch says.

That's not the only thing getting some big upgrades. "Taking a look at the gameplay side of things, the raw power of the consoles allows us to run more complex engines (plural) within our A.I. architecture," he says. "In addition to the new Impact Engine (a new in-air contact-shot system), we have new algorithms running that govern foot planting, contextual motion, improved pathing, player-size detection logic, and much more. The truth is, with more overhead, we can run more complex calculations consistently, which allows us to deliver a significantly more robust, more realistic, and more lifelike experience to our fans."

One of the most noticeable aspects, dribbling, was also rebuilt from the ground up, allowing you to change up the pace and control the speed of your size-up moves. This opens the door for more realistic moves like hesitations, escapes, stepbacks, hard go's, crosses, and even the triple threat. "The difference, honestly, is night and day," Boenisch says. "We retained the concept of signature dribble styles introduced a few years back, but all other aspects were scrapped and re-architected." Little things like Visual Concepts' physics-ball rewrite not only improved throwing alley-oops off the glass to teammates, but allowed the team to include bounce-touch passes for the first time in NBA 2K. And this is only scratching the surface of the gameplay upgrades.

A NEW GENERATION TAKES FLIGHT

NBA 2K dominated this last generation, so it goes into this new one with lofty expectations. One thing that has always been held in high regard is its on-the-court gameplay, and it looks like the new console power has only helped it shore up some of the weaknesses there. Time will tell if it can keep innovating and staying at the top of the sports game standings, but things are looking pretty good right now, especially since it's the first sports game to go all-in on the PS5 and Xbox Series X at launch. ◆

THE PLATINUM ARCHITECT

A talk with PlayStation 5's Mark Cerny about his fascination with PlayStation's Platinum Trophies

interview by Andrew Reiner

Mark Cerny has worn many hats in his career. From designer and programmer to director and producer, he's helped bring dozens of video games to life, and has been an instrumental player in guiding development teams towards success. He's now wearing the hat of an architect, tasked with the monumental undertaking of ushering in Sony's next generation of gaming. Cerny was lead designer of PlayStation 4, and is chief architect of PlayStation 5, but today he doesn't want to talk about the hardware's nuts and bolts or speed and power; he just wants to talk about how great games are, and how he's hooked on the pursuit of Platinum Trophies.

Cerny, 56, has picked up 33 Platinum Trophies on PlayStation 4. A few of these Platinums are gimmies that are automatically unlocked by finishing a game, but most took considerable time, effort, and skill. He's currently pursuing Platinum number 34 in the brutally difficult Cuphead. Cerny believes his completionist approach stems from a similar drive he had in the 1980s, when he was trying to get high scores in arcade games.

Earning over 30 Platinum Trophies is impressive, but it's by no means a record or anywhere near it. There are players with more than 1,200 of them. Regardless, it's great to see a creator dive deep into games to explore everything they have to offer. The creation of PlayStation 5 came from someone who knows games inside and out, not just in how to make them, but what makes them fun to play to the point of getting the almighty Platinum. "In some ways, I feel like I'm learning what the developer values most in the game that they created," Cerny told me in a video call from his home office, which is peppered with eye-opening game memorabilia, including a Marvel's Spider-Man poster signed by various Insomniac Games developers.

I talked to Cerny about the drive to get Platinum Trophies, his love of arcades, and some of his favorite Trophies to chase.

Take me back to your early days of gaming. You told me you played a lot of Defender.

I was a huge arcade player, starting with Space Invaders. I cut my teeth on that and Asteroids and a couple of more games. Never really got into Centipede, but I was crazy in love with Missile Command and Defender. Pretty much my spare time in late high school and college was in the arcades playing these games. Part of [the allure] was the controls. It wasn't like the Atari 2600, where you had one button. You had a dial for Missile Command, Defender had its seven buttons and joystick, and Robotron had two joysticks. I loved that.

They were really hard games. When we look at Cuphead today we say, "Oh my god, I played that first run-and-gun level and must have died 50 times." That's only replicating the typical arcade difficulty back in the 1980s. With arcade games, you had to kill the player in three minutes as a design rule. We got test data on a game that was four-and-a-half minutes, and clearly that game was never going to succeed because it wasn't killing the player fast enough.

Arcade gaming was such a different mindset than it is today. We were trying to be the best on a machine in every venue we went to. We weren't trying to finish a story or see the credits roll.

Right. It also had a bad influence on me as a designer. I shifted out of making arcade games in 1986, and what I was doing with things like Shooting Gallery for the Sega Master System was trying to represent the arcade experience at home. We didn't have to kill you in three minutes at home, but this continued all the way through the first Crash Bandicoot. I realized towards the end of that project that it was just too hard. I spent the last six months [of development] trying to get the levels to the point that they could be finished by most people. We still kept lives for some reason. We kept lives for so long.

Talk to me about your history with Trophies. When did you develop a desire for going for the Platinum?

On PlayStation 3, I didn't get any Trophies. I did most of my playing then prior to launch on my dev kit, so I don't have much of a visible history on PlayStation 3. When I got PlayStation 4, and was on social networks, I thought it would be fun to expose everything I was doing to players.

For me, the way it started was Resogun, which is basically Defender. That's where I started getting into the Trophies. I was like, "I might be able to get the Platinum." I was in the top 10 on the international leaderboards for some of the categories. I got confidence from that.

The other thing, the number-two guy on [PlayStation] hardware is a guy at Naughty Dog, and we got into a competition. He had eight Platinum Trophies and I had six. I'm still losing seven years later, but I'm still proud of where I'm at with 33 platinums. He's at 40 something. We still give each other crap about it. He got a platinum in Job Simulator. Now how hard is that? [laughs] In his defense, he wasn't even going for it – it just popped up – so he says.

Resogun was your first platinum? That's a hell of a way to start.
That's the first one I got. To briefly go though my list, I started with Resogun, then did Infamous: Second Son, which is interesting because you have to play good vs. evil, and then evil vs. good. Soundshapes, let me tell you, I have no rhythm. Those levels looked impossible, and then two hours later I did it. I learned so much about David Bowie playing that game because they must have had an entire Bowie album on there. I did Transistor. I was so proud of the Platinum for Wolfenstein: The New Order. I had to finish it on the Über difficulty, and I had a bug where the ammo stopped spawning. That was hard. I looked up the percentage of people that got that Platinum, it was 3.2 percent. That's pretty good for a Trophy.

The next Wolfenstein is even harder; you have to finish that on the Mein Leben difficulty without any saves or any death. At first it looked like no one in the world could do it, and then a month goes by, but someone did it. Certainly it's beyond my capabilities.

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor is a good one; it has nice challenges like riding those beasts. Until Dawn is also a fun Trophy because you have to see all of the different permutations in the story. Talos Principle had mind-bending puzzles and a beautiful story.

What about Knack 1 and 2? These are two games you helped create.
These are worth pointing out. I play my own games to get the Platinum because I want to know what the experience is like. For Knack, it was not very enjoyable getting the Platinum. It pops out randomly. The time commitment isn't bad, but the random nature of things makes it just brutal. We fixed that for Knack II.

I see you got the Platinum in Rocket League. Impressive.
This is the only Platinum Trophy I've ever gone after that has a multiplayer component. The MP folk are just too good! I can remember being on the Resistance: Fall of Man design team on PS3 and playing the game for hundreds of hours – I could finish the campaign on the hardest difficulty – and the weekend it came out, I went online and thought I'd show off my skills. Instead, I ended up getting dominated by players who were playing the game for the very first time. So, if the Platinum Trophy needs online, I skip it.

As a Platinum-Trophy hunter, when you get a new game, do you look at the Trophy list first and maybe a guide to figure out how to optimize your playthrough?
First thing, I'm so busy that I'm usually playing games two years behind. This year I finally played God of War. I really enjoyed it. By the time I get to a new game, it's a known thing. I do take a peek at the guide to see if there's something totally annoying I should be doing along the way so I don't have to play the game twice. That's about the extent of the guide experience. Some of these games there's a huge benefit of knowing things you have to do.

You are in an elite crew as one of the people to get the Platinum Trophy in Invisible, Inc. Only .1 percent of players have gotten it. How many players is that?
I don't think we display anything lower than .1 percent. It has to be less than 100 people. It took me months to get that, and part of that is I don't have much time in a day to play. Maybe 30 minutes. And then there's the weekends.

Do you find banging your head against a challenge is enjoyable? Knowing that it's possible, but not a lot of people have done it?
I guess I want to take on the biggest possible challenge. It is a flashback to the arcades. I want to play it on regular, hard, and then beat it on the hardest. In the arcades, we'd build skills on those games for six months to a year.

Is there a game that was too hard and you just had to move on from getting the Platinum?
I started some games saying, "I'm going to do it," and then realized there was just a lot of side content that you had to do. In some of those cases, I won't even finish the game.

I'm doing Cuphead right now, and I don't know if I'll ever finish it because it may be too hard for me.

Where are you at in it?
I've beaten it, but now I have to do it on the expert difficulty. Because I don't know if I'll be able to do it or not, I'm starting on the toughest bosses – the ones people say they gave up on. If I can get through the toughest five, then I'll know I can do everything else. I've taken down one of the top five. I just finished it this past weekend.

Any Platinums you'd recommend to people? Or that you loved?
Gravity Rush Remastered. People really misunderstand what Gravity Rush is. I wish more people would play it. It's really wonderful. Horizon Zero Dawn works well with the storyline. Going after the Platinum and getting everyone in the world as an ally makes the game more fun. Astro Bot in VR is all about twitch reflexes. There are like three puzzles that are challenging. Ghost of Tsushima. I liked it so much that I even did things that aren't necessary, like getting all of the outfits. ◆

SOARING IN THE CLOUDS: GENSHIN IMPACT'S STYLISH SUCCESS

Genshin Impact is an enchanting game with a controversial monetization system. What does the path ahead look like?

by Daniel Tack

For many players in North America, Mihoyo's Genshin Impact was destined to become a free-to-play blip on the gaming radar, passed over due to its adherence to mobile-game monetization models, lack of significant co-op experiences, and an absolute lean-in to both pay-to-win and pay-for-convenience mechanics. Those factors can relegate titles to lunchtime phone tapping and brief flirtations before the structures become overbearing and obvious, but Genshin Impact has experienced unbridled success even in the face of its unfortunate change from gaming for loot to gambling-for-loot system. How did this happen?

On the surface, it's easy to say that the reason is because Genshin Impact is, first and foremost, an excellent game; many titles that embrace the "gachapon" system are simply life-support systems for facilitating monetization that show serious flaws after a few hours. Genshin Impact isn't a game you finish and set aside. Instead, it embraces many techniques that you're familiar with from major MMORPGs like World of Warcraft or lobby-based instanced experiences like Destiny and Division 2. You can complete quests and arcs, but you're never really finished as new content flows into the game. Genshin Impact isn't the first single-player experience to use the games-as-service model, but its size and scope (combined with an inviting free-to-play price tag) make it appealing to try.

Piercing The Paywall

Genshin Impact provides a giant world to explore, simple-but-interesting combat, and many interacting reward loops. One of the key differences that sets Genshin Impact apart from many other free-to-play titles is its lack of any paywall. In most games that utilize this loot-box structure, there's a clear point – maybe after a few minutes, maybe after a few hours – when the gameplay experience becomes throttled unless players are willing to spend money. Whether this is via a time-gated stamina system or the necessity to include high-rarity characters/weapons/items in your party to continue, the result is the same: it forces the user to make purchases to continue playing. In Genshin Impact, your progress does slow down after around 40 hours, but it's never restricted or locked behind a paywall gate. Even after you exhaust the current content, there's still plenty of joy in running around the world to hunt down random chests, mining rocks, and cooking up some spicy meals.

Some would argue that the resin system, which gives players a set amount of boss battles, dungeon crawls, and other specific useful item farming in each 24-hour time span is a form of paywall. But in practice, it just feels like any other system that major MMORPGs use to keep the most voracious players from blowing through every piece of content by playing 12 hours a day. While many players have voiced extreme disapproval at the resin system, there's always going to be a point where a service game needs to corral and plateau progression for a playerbase as more content is prepared. While it doesn't feel good to have your progress stymied, some formations have to be in place to keep players from simply finishing everything before content can catch up.

Building A Better Future

Games-as-service live and die by their content-update cadence. Fortnite's aggressive pace has set a gold standard that most can't possibly hope to contend with, but Mihoyo's previous efforts in the mobile arena are critical here. While mobile games typically serve up snack-size updates, Genshin Impact is planned to receive giant regions on a regular basis alongside events, enemies, towns, gear, and more. Of course, there will be plenty of new gacha characters to chase alongside this content, but the fascinating possibility of a primarily single-player evolving game becoming a staple alongside traditional story-based "one-and-done" experiences is intriguing. Obviously, not every single-player experience is suited for a service structure, and service titles rise and fall like the tide, but Genshin Impact's model is sure to attract attention from other large publishers, developers, and investors.

However, this raises some additional questions. Gacha is a challenging model to sell audiences on, and as many companies shift from loot boxes to battle passes and other reward structures that don't closely resemble gambling, there is likely to be some serious aversion toward copying Genshin Impact. The more companies attempt to inject gambling-centric models into mainstream gaming outside of mobile (where it's essentially become an accepted evil), the likelier it is that some sort of regulatory oversight may come into play. No gaming company wants to be the one that ruins the party for everyone, and there's plenty of inherent risk in service games, so it's unlikely that we see a slew of gacha games attempt to cannibalize the single-player market with living game designs. Of course, there will be a few attempts, but before we trot out the age-old "single-player games are dying!" fears, realize that this approach is still an anomaly and not the standard.

Genshin Impact has a lot to offer players in terms of exploration, discovery, and progression loops as they wander its giant world. While it has had explosive success and attention, it must be able to handle pushing out compelling content over time to keep the spotlight shining bright – to keep current players engaged, attract new ones, and of course, keep the gacha wheels spinning. ◆

IT'S IN THE GAME BUT OUT OF THE OFFICE

How EA Sports adapted to the new work-from-home reality

by Brian Shea

To say 2020 hasn't gone as expected would be an understatement. With the COVID-19 global pandemic serving as a backdrop, everyone has been asked to change their way of life. One of the areas most impacted is how we work on a day-to-day basis. Businesses have been severely affected by the pandemic, and the recommended safety measures by experts and state officials have led to a major shift to working from home where possible.

As one of the largest game publishers in the industry, Electronic Arts is among the many businesses affected by the transition to working remotely. Fortunately, the company had been putting technology in place to allow its team members to work on any game from any location while maintaining IP security over the last several years. The timing could not have been more fortuitous, as the global events forced the gaming giant's plan into action.

"A lot of the stuff, from an infrastructure standpoint, we had in place and we had been testing; we've been having those discussions for years," says vice president and general manager of EA Tiburon, Daryl Holt. "When the stay-at-home order was put in place in mid-March, as a company, we made the decision, and pretty much overnight, people started working from home."

That ability to have its team up and running in short order proved crucial for EA Tiburon, which was in the thick of development on Madden NFL 21 at the time. However, there was still much to learn for the publisher.

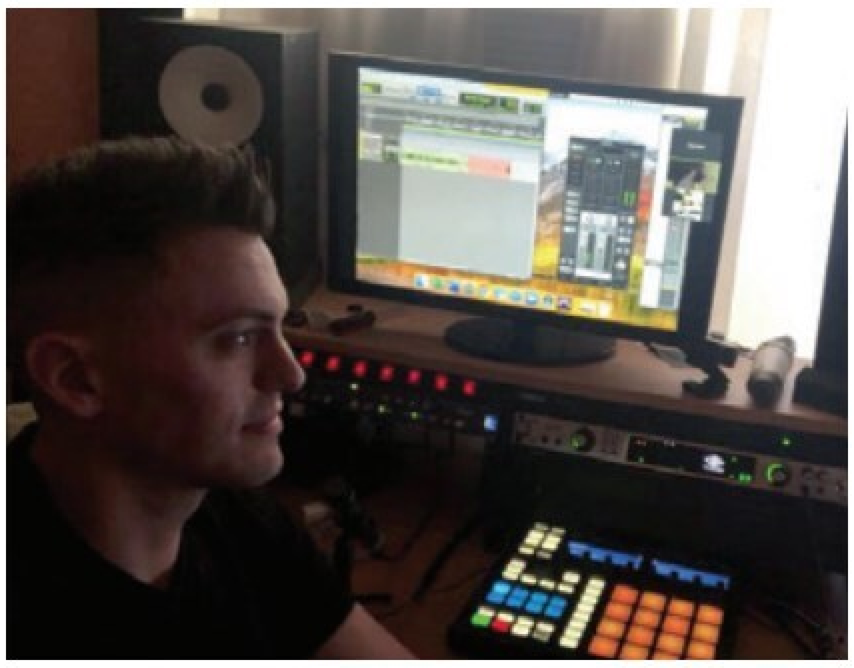
The timing of the pandemic uniquely hit the Madden development team: The Super Bowl had happened just a month prior to the COVID-19-imposed lockdown of the United States, signaling the beginning of the NFL offseason and the end of support for Madden NFL 20. The studio was firing on all cylinders with Madden NFL 21 development as the work-from-home order hit.

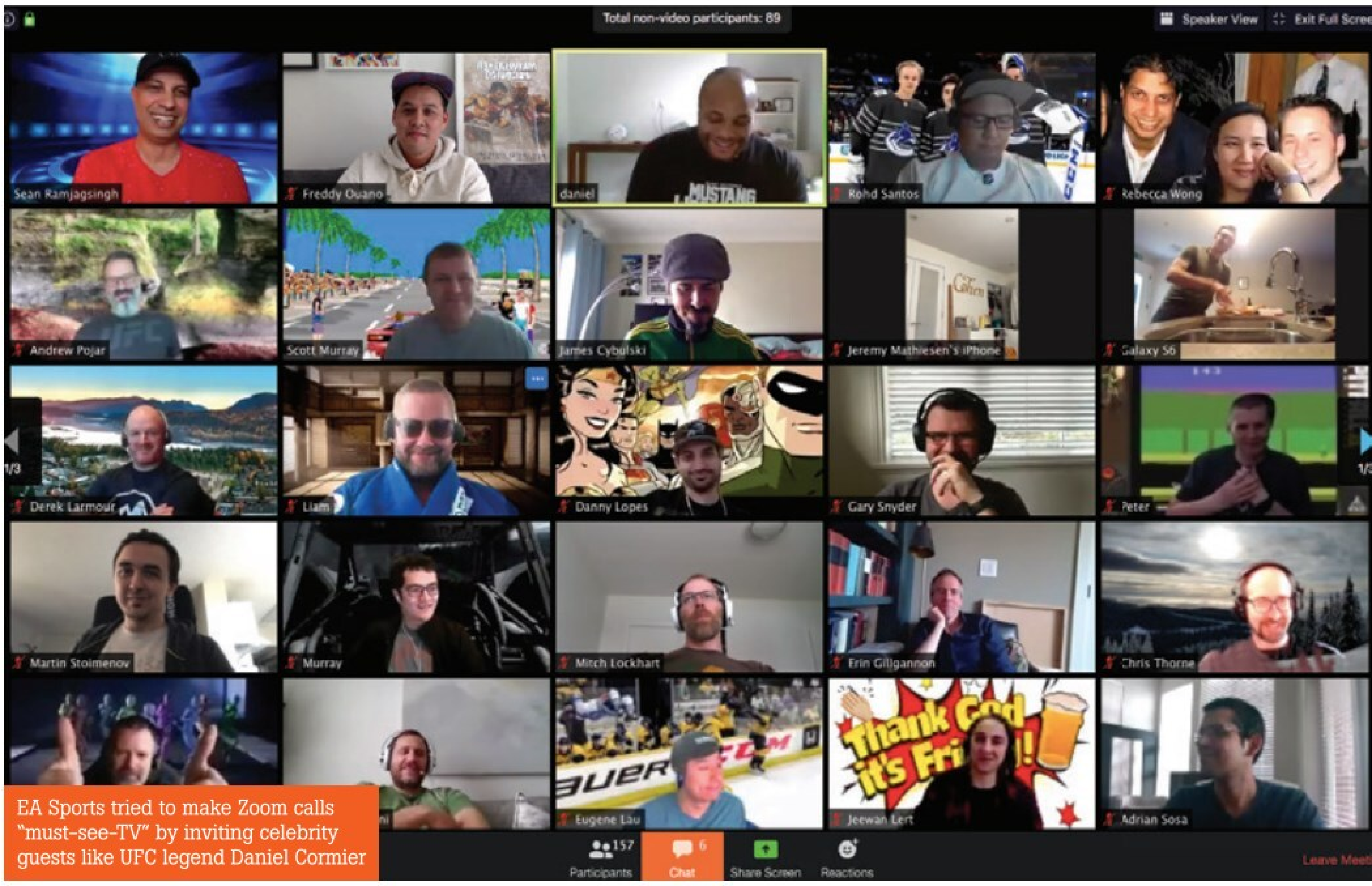
While UFC 4 was fortunate with much of its timing due to a longer development cycle, it was still affected to the point that the game was briefly delayed before it was even revealed. The team was targeting a launch for the weekend of July 11 to coincide with the UFC's annual International Fight Week event. While they made a smooth transition to working from home, that date just wasn't possible. NHL 21 and FIFA 21 were also pushed from their usual targeted releases in September to October.

While Madden NFL 21 didn't miss its release date, it did have to change course on multiple things, including how some of the cutscenes were done in its Face of the Franchise career mode. Longtime sports personality and journalist Rich Eisen had to self-shoot his scenes, while other components were changed or outright cut.

Ordinary game-development situations, like playtesting the game in a social setting, became difficult, forcing the developers to find solutions. The Madden team decided to playtest as isolated individuals, while the NHL devs held socially distanced build-review parties in garages.

The Madden and FIFA teams also had to deal with finishing up motion-capture. Since gathering large groups was inadvisable, EA distributed mocap equipment to the talent, and the development team used Beam robots, wheeled devices with a screen and camera, so the developer could direct the talent. Despite their

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Jeremy Mathiesen's iPhone
Galaxy S6
Derek Larmour
Liam
Danny Lopes
Gary Snyder
Peter
Martin Stoimenov
Murray
Mitch Lockhart
Erin Gilgannon
Chris Thorne
Eugene Lau
Jeewan Lert
Adrian Sosa
1/3
157
Participants
6
Chat
Share Screen
Reactions
Leave Meeting

EA Sports tried to make Zoom calls "must-see-TV" by inviting celebrity guests like UFC legend Daniel Cormier best efforts to make it as normal as possible, communicating through robots across multiple locations can never be as simple or effective as directing someone in the same room, resulting in more laborious sessions that took more time to complete.

EA Sports also had to get creative when it came to recording commentary, with remote sessions over the video-conferencing app Zoom replacing in-person sessions. "Historically, we would fly our commentators to a studio location and our lead audio producer joined that session along with some of the audio artists and they would collaboratively work in person to get what we needed," says FIFA executive producer Aaron McHardy. "Instead, this year we had to look at shipping recording gear to our commentators' houses."

From using different techniques to having life distractions such as family or internet issues at home disrupt the normal flow of work, EA Sports had to be nimble in how it approached keeping the lines of communication open. The studios used asynchronous communication methods like prerecorded messages team members could watch on-demand, and it relied more on applications like Zoom and messaging app Slack.

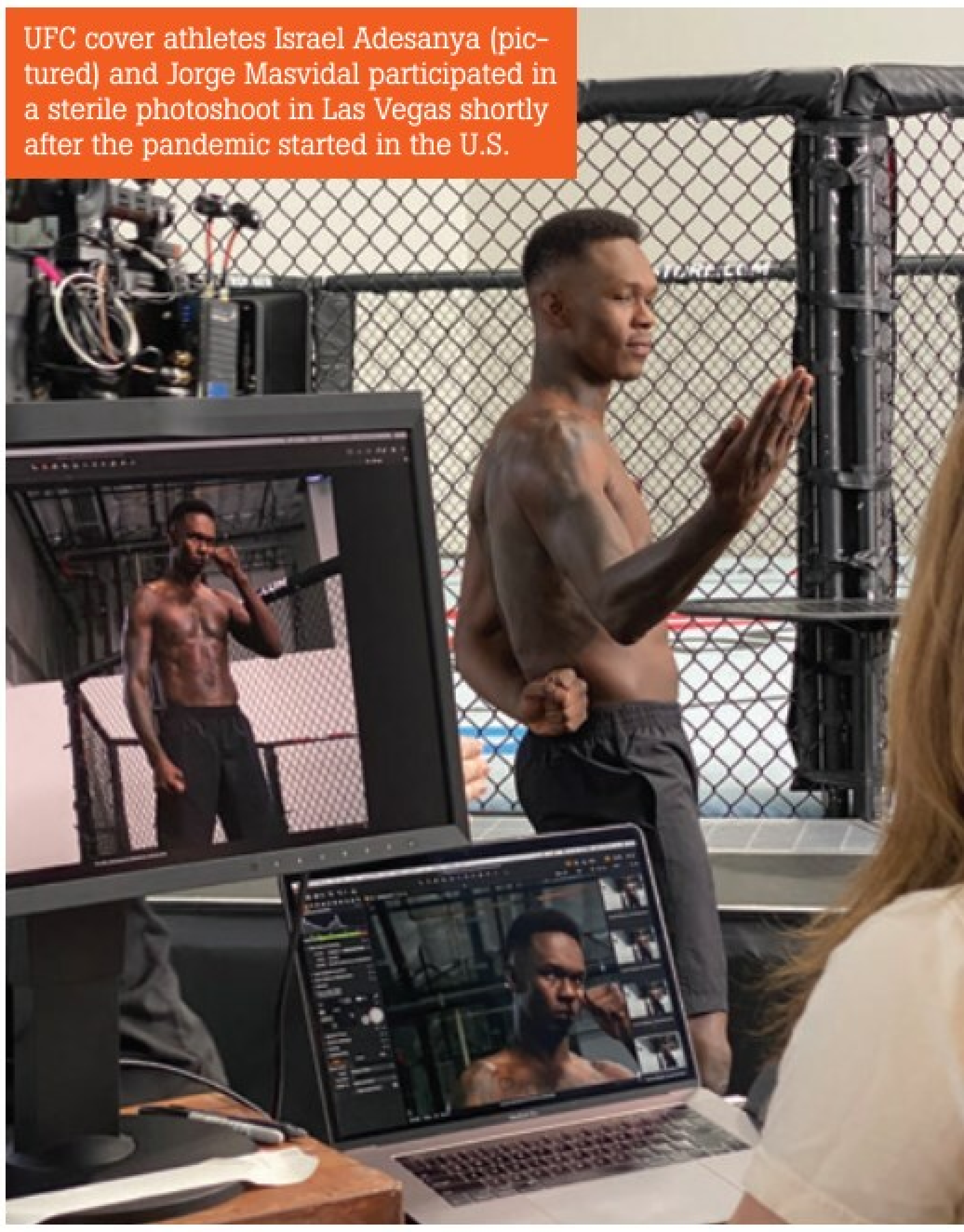
Regardless of how many plans you put into place, life sometimes gets in the way; schools being closed or extra precautions needing to be taken for previously simple tasks such as grocery shopping led to additional stressors that made working difficult at times. "We had to make sure people knew it was okay," Holt says. "At the same time, we had to then use what data we were seeing. As we start to deal with the human element and make sure it's supported, then we need to interpret that and what it means for the project and the team."

That human element meant EA Sports had to consider work/life balance in a new way. The teams began scheduling virtual pizza parties and giving out gift cards. When NHL 21 launched, the developers received celebratory giftboxes at their houses. The UFC 4 and FIFA 21 teams even worked to make certain Zoom meetings "must-see TV," by hosting costume contests or bringing in celebrity guests like former UFC champion Daniel Cormier, *The Daily Show*'s Trevor Noah, or Formula One driver Max Verstappen to chat with the developers.

As the games approached launch, marketing also had to think outside the box. Massive in-person cover-reveal events weren't possible, so once again, flexibility played a key role. The NHL and FIFA teams created composite art and video features about their cover athletes, while EA Tiburon worked closely with Madden NFL 21 cover star Lamar Jackson to let him shoot his own cover reveal. EA Sports shipped Jackson camera kits and helped with direction remotely so the Baltimore Ravens quarterback could tell his story.

The UFC 4 team once again benefited from fortunate timing and was able to gather its two cover athletes, Israel Adesanya and Jorge Masvidal, together in Las Vegas for a sanitized photoshoot around March 20. "I think we benefited from that shoot being so soon after they moved to working from home," NHL producer and UFC executive producer Sean Ramjagsingh says. "I think if that shoot was scheduled a week later or two weeks later, it probably doesn't happen."

As the teams move into the future, all of the lessons learned and processes developed for this situation will not be for naught when ordinary professional life is restored. Ramjagsingh thinks working from home will almost be an expectation rather than an exception. "I feel like as the next generation of the workforce starts to come through, they're going to want more flexibility and have different expectations of how they work and where they work," he says. "I think once we get back to normalcy, that's the exciting part for me: seeing how we adapt to enable people to work from home more and be more flexible with where and when they work."


UFC cover athletes Israel Adesanya (pictured) and Jorge Masvidal participated in a sterile photoshoot in Las Vegas shortly after the pandemic started in the U.S.

The Madden NFL team used social-distancing methods to shoot its ads featuring King Keraun

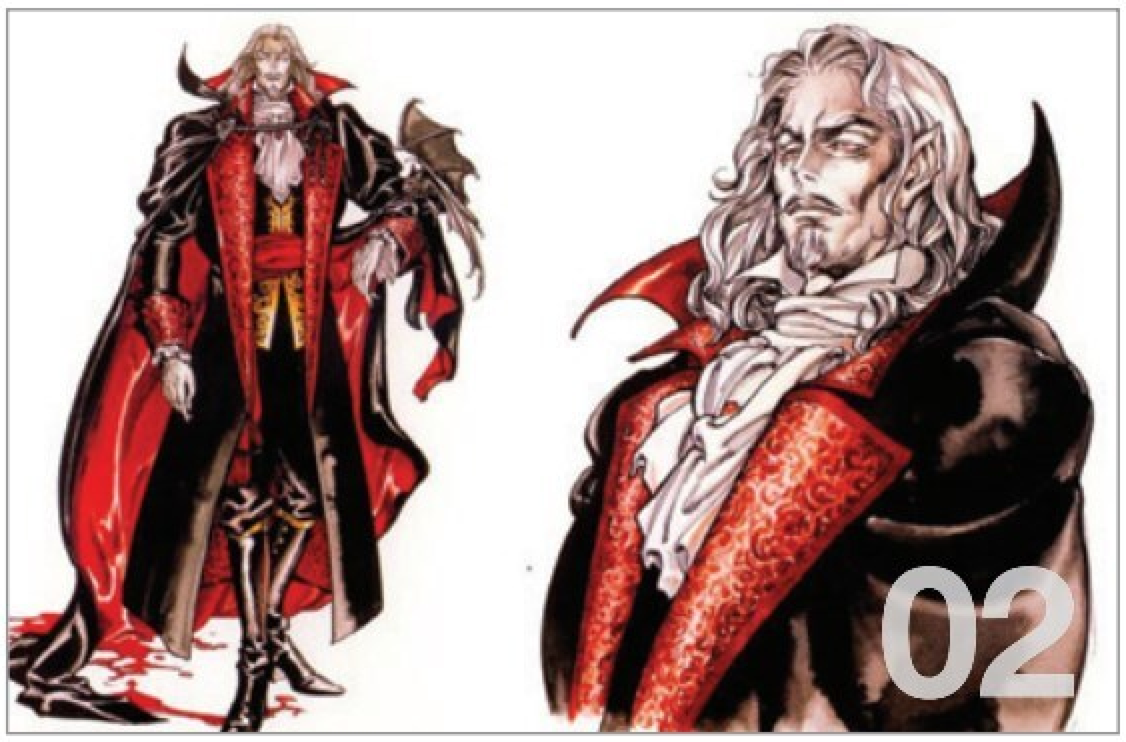
MYTHOLOGICAL MONSTERS

by Matt Miller

Jörmungandr

God of War (2018)

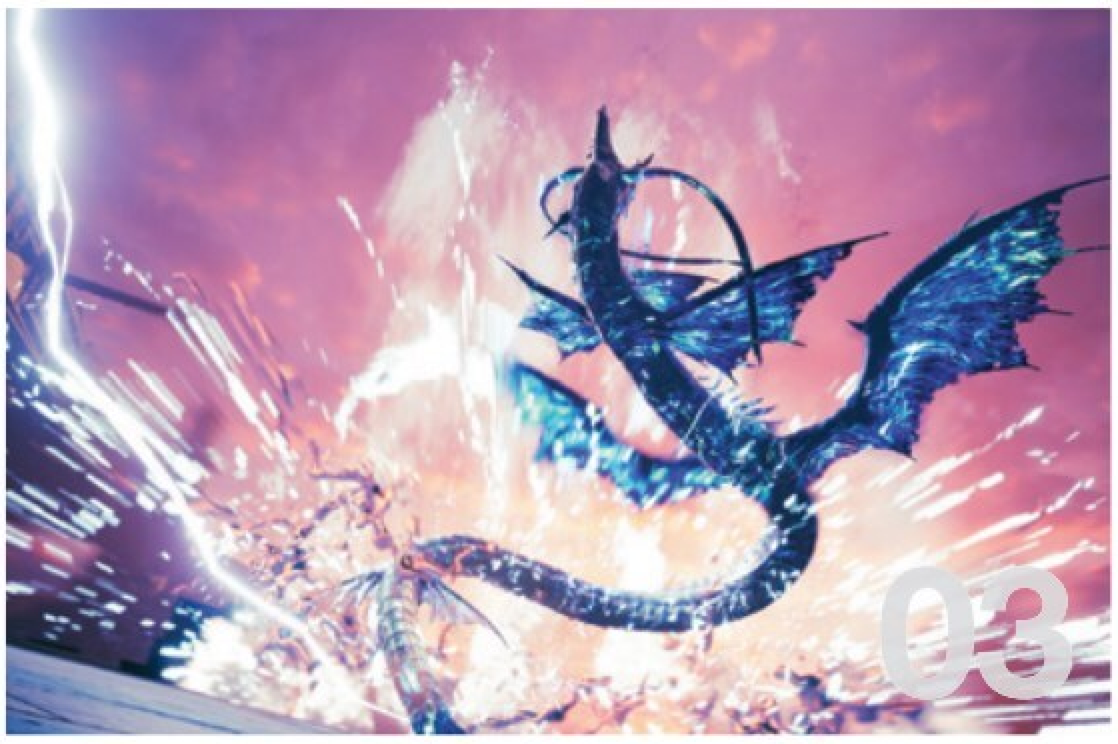
Some monsters are so gigantic you can't even perceive their full size on screen. Old Icelandic legend cites a creature so huge it could circle the world and grasp its own tail. The unfathomably massive world serpent steals the show more than once in Kratos' Norse revival, presenting a legendary take on a foundational Northern European tale.



Dracula

Castlevania series

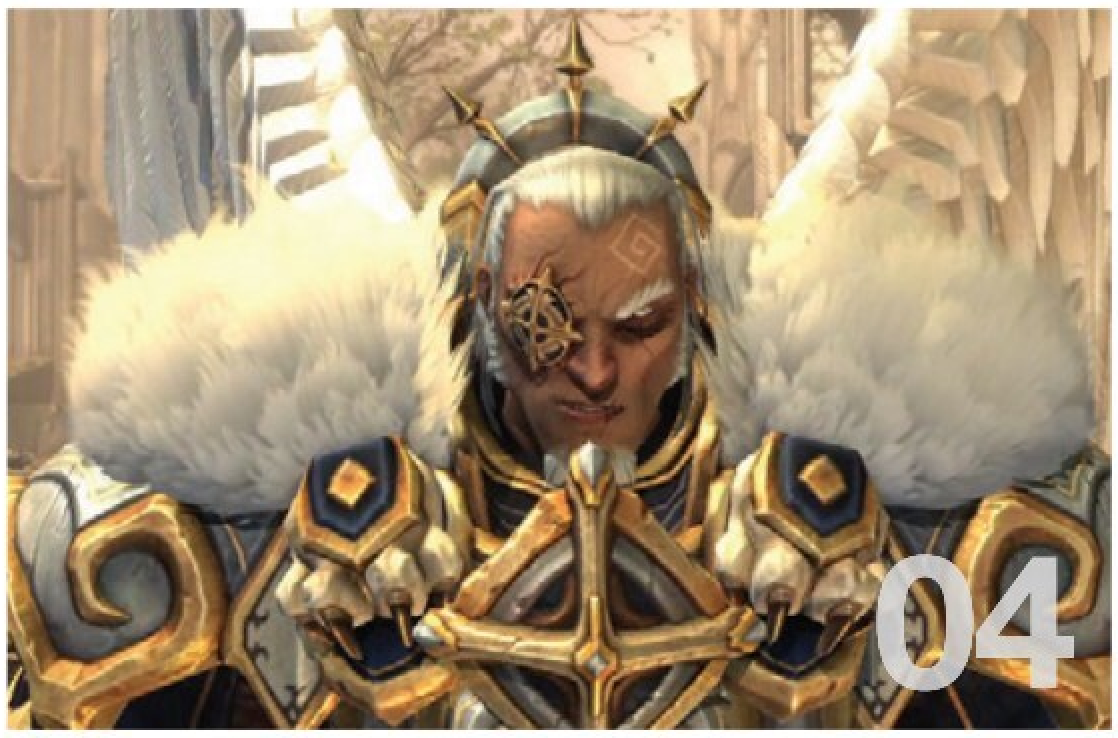
Few monsters have captured the imagination of contemporary audiences as completely as Bram Stoker's Dracula, which was based on the frightening real-world histories surrounding Vlad the Impaler. Konami transforms the concept-defining vampire into a conflicted and heinous master of evil – so powerful that he seems to never truly die, but is only pushed back until the next time a Belmont rises to fight him.



Leviathan

Final Fantasy series

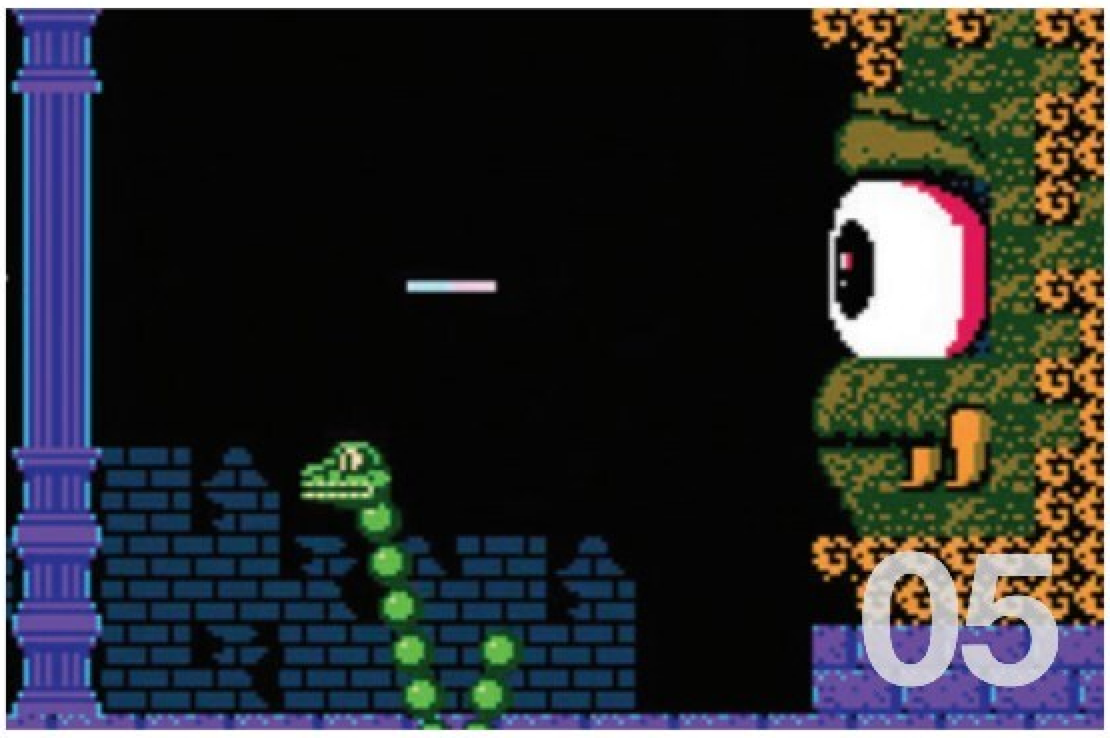
The great sea-monster myth of Leviathan appears in ancient texts, with parallels across Mesopotamian and Jewish chronicles. Final Fantasy's long-running practice of tapping into legend for its monster summoning finds the powerful beast appearing as one of the ultimate weapons to deploy in battle. No matter the franchise entry, calling Leviathan is sure to reveal an over-the-top sequence filled with flashing fins, roaring maws, and a flood of biblical proportions.



Abaddon

Darksiders

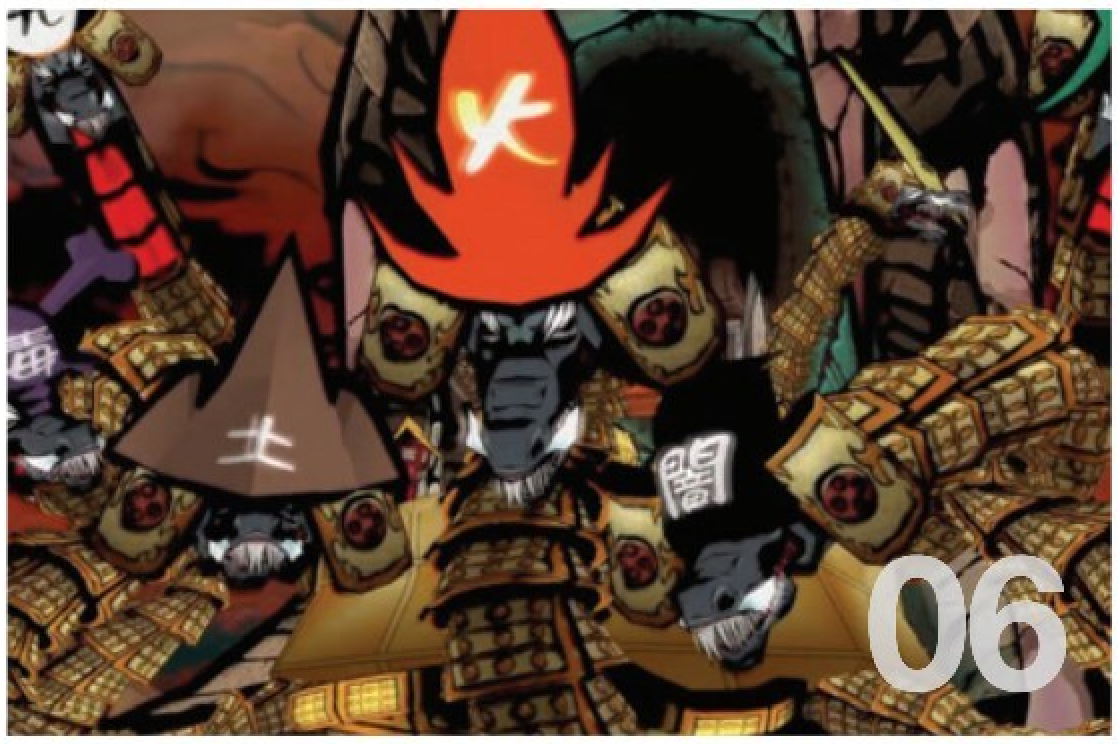
The Darksiders games borrowed extensively, and with significant dramatic license, from the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, found in the Bible. In Darksiders' transformation, the Four Horsemen take on the role of protagonists, and the fallen angel named Abaddon serves as the big baddie in the first game. By setting in motion the plan to prematurely begin the apocalypse, Abaddon embraces the truly demonic nature at his heart and earns his position as a true monster.



Medusa

Kid Icarus

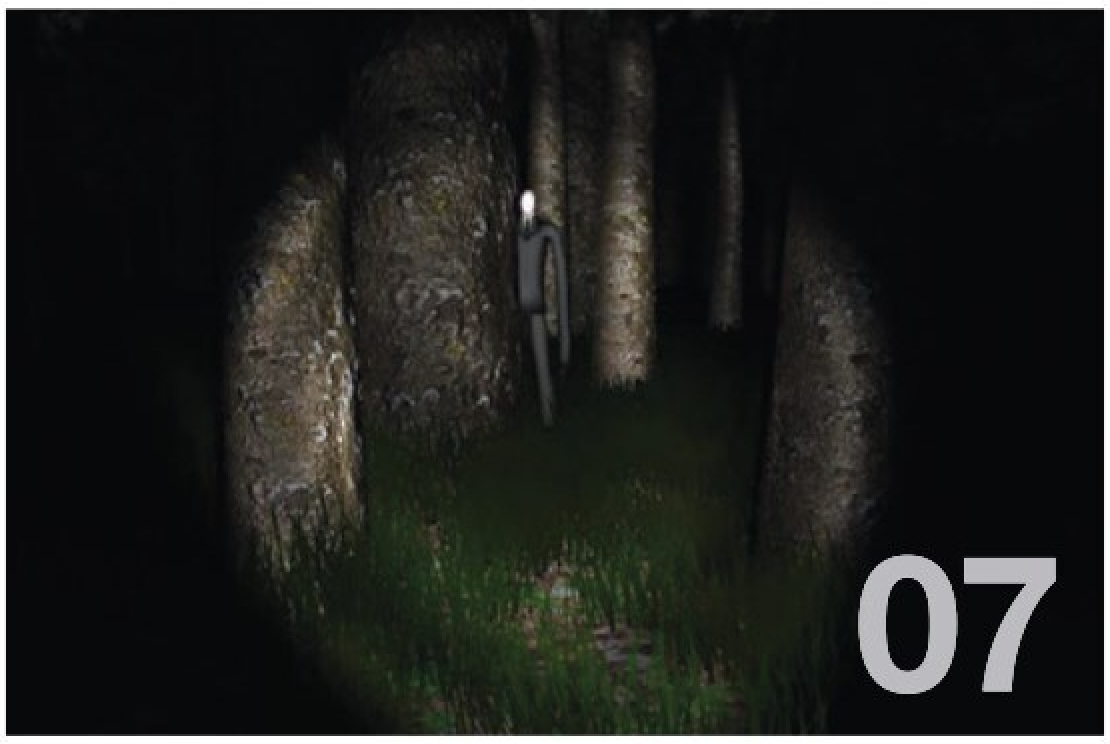
The instruction booklet may have called the world "Angel Land," but we all knew this was among the first games inspired by Greek mythology. In one of those original myths, Medusa was punished by Athena for violating her temple. In Kid Icarus, Medusa appears as one of the most memorable final bosses from the NES era, manifesting at the end of a surprise flight level and setting the stage for a writhing mass of mythological baddies to come into gaming over subsequent years.



Orochi

Okami

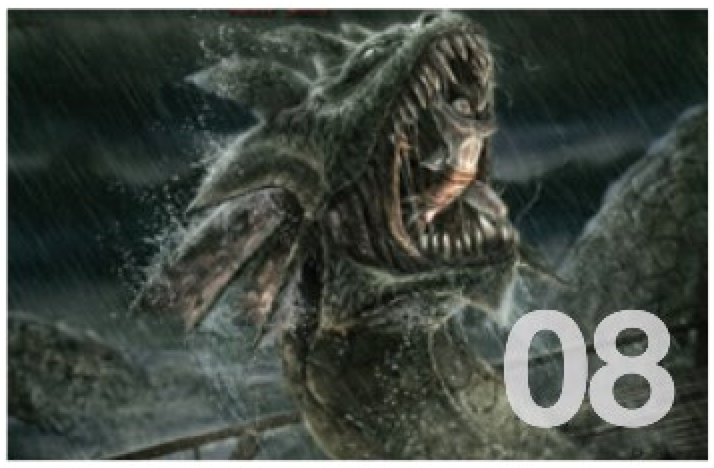
The eight-headed beast called Yamata no Orochi is a fixture of Japanese mythology, devouring young maidens until it is slain by the kami named Susanoo. In the gorgeous Okami, the tale is rewoven to find the sun goddess Amaterasu joining a figure named Susano to defeat the beast. Sometimes overlooked as one of the great games of the mid-2000s, the conflict against Orochi is one of the most memorable and strikingly illustrated aspects of this beautiful watercolor tale.



Slender Man

Slender: The Eight Pages

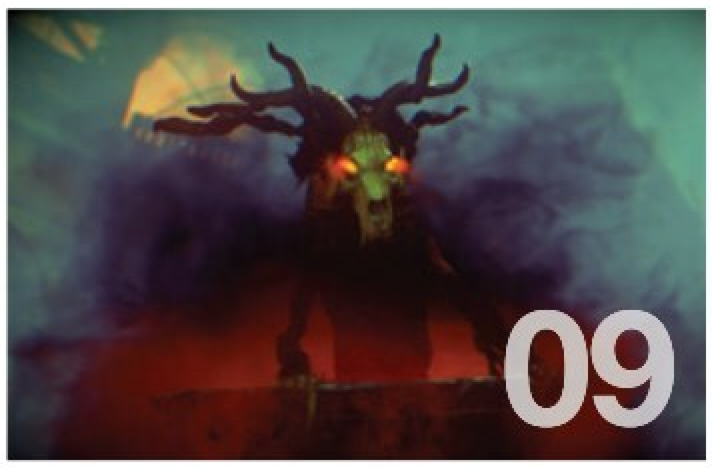
Not every myth has its origins in the ancient past. Modern internet culture gave rise and popularity to the creepy visage of the Slender Man as recently as 2009, and from there the gaunt figure saw a viral spread into all sorts of places, including a particularly haunting appearance in the dark forests of Slender: The Eight Pages. The faceless monster certainly creeps us out when he appears from behind those trees, but it's all just fun and … what's that behind you?



Hydra

God of War (2005)

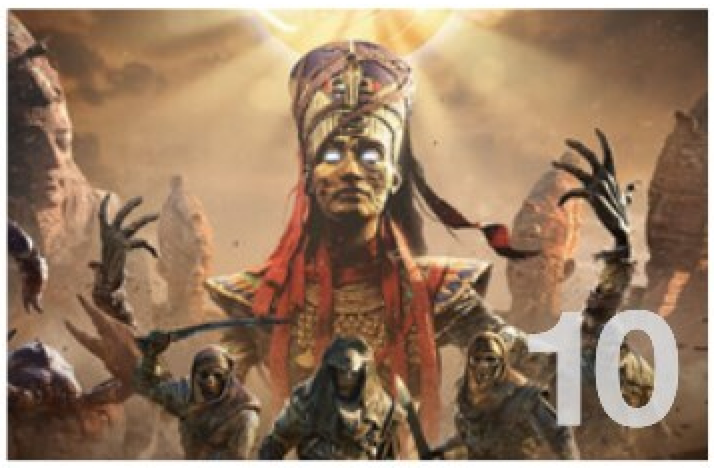
The iconic myth of the Hydra found purchase in ancient Greece as a water-bound reptile with nine heads. Famously, cutting off one head was said to allow two to emerge in its place. While later God of War bosses could be said to outdo the mayhem of the Hydra fight, gamers in 2005 can clearly recall the tidal shift in scope and excitement presented by that first big fight aboard a sinking ship, heralding a new age of action combat.



Baba Yaga

Rise of the Tomb Raider

Slavic folklore tells us of the witch named Baba Yaga, who travels the wilderness on a moving hut ambulating with chicken legs. Her nature seems capricious and unpredictable, as likely to eat you as help you. Rise of the Tomb Raider offers a memorable twist on the fiction, as a drugged and disoriented Lara Croft faces off against the murderous myth and discovers that not every story can be taken at face value.



The Pharaoh Mummies

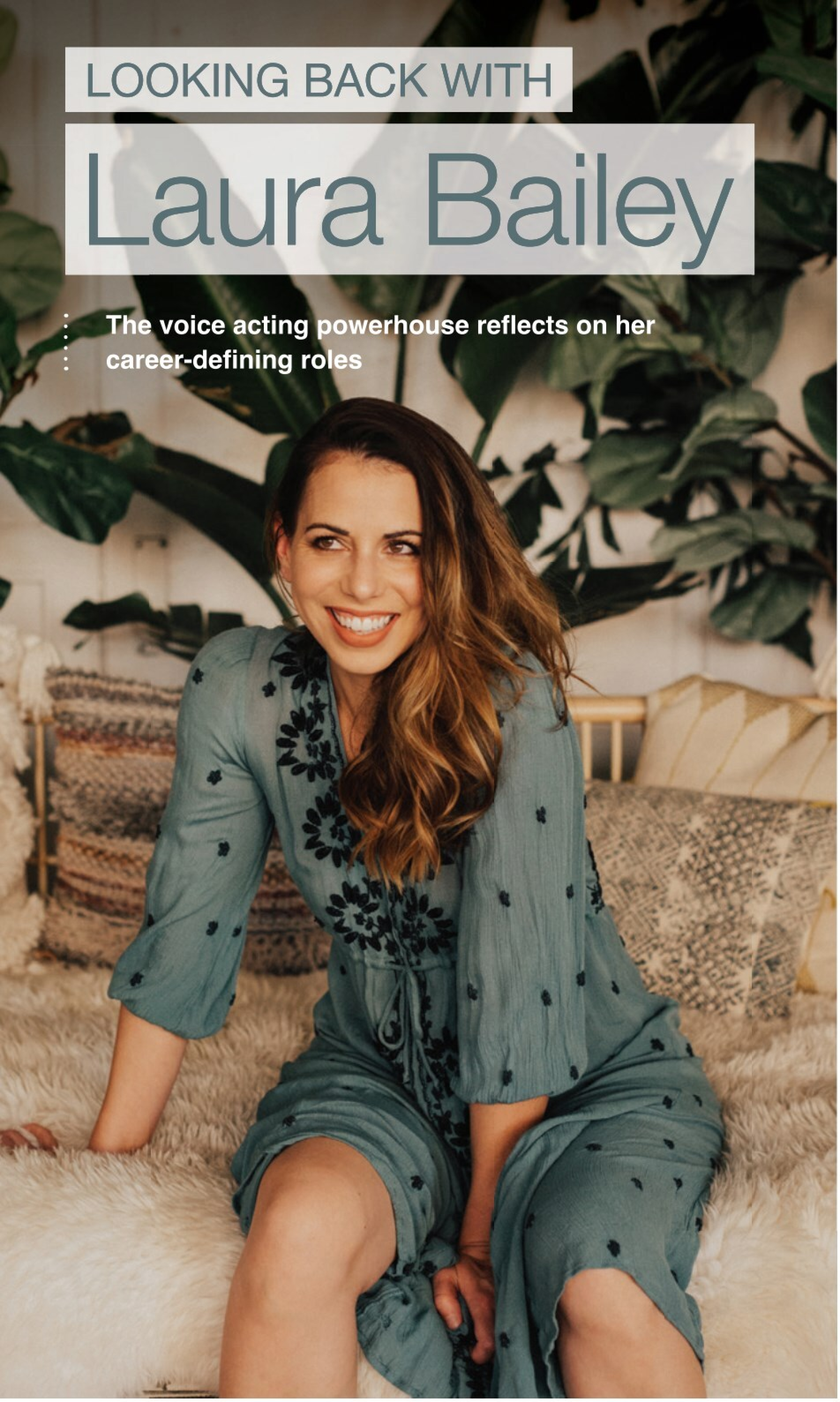
Assassin's Creed Origins

After a tale that unfolds across the sweeping history of Ancient Egypt, the expansion for Assassin's Creed Origins takes on a decidedly more supernatural twist, as Bayek confronts the likes of Nefertiti and Tutankhamen as immensely powerful undead mummies. The myth of the walking and bandaged dead has been romanticized for hundreds of years, drawn from the very real process of mummification across manifold cultures.

LOOKING BACK WITH

Laura Bailey

The voice acting powerhouse reflects on her career-defining roles



If you play video games, chances are you've heard Laura Bailey's voice. Across anime and video games, Bailey has voiced 500 characters, landing roles in popular series such as Gears of War, World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy, and Persona. Like Troy Baker and Nolan North, she's become one of the most prolific names in the business. These days, she continues to thrive, voicing Abby in The Last of Us Part II and Black Widow in Marvel's Avengers, but you can also catch her on *Critical Role*, a weekly livestreamed Dungeon & Dragons game with fellow voice actors. With her star continuing to rise, we sat down with Bailey to reminisce and pick a few roles she felt best defined her career. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

Pick #1: World of Warcraft's Jaina Proudmoore

As one of the protagonists and finest mages in all of Azeroth, Jaina Proudmoore needs no introduction for Warcraft fans. However, Bailey also chose the character for a personal reason: It takes her back to an important place in time. "I've been voicing her since I first came out to California, and that's when I realized, 'Okay, voice acting is what I want to do.' Specifically, to come out here and get to see all of the different studios and understand that voice acting can be so much more than I realized. It was just so important, and Jaina Proudmoore has really been an anchor in my life through all of that."

Bailey also enjoys that it's a role she gets to keep coming back to, saying, "it's like coming home" when entering recording sessions. "It's cool because when you're with a character for that long, you really get to see them grow up. She's matured right along with me. From when I first started voicing her, she was this … I don't want to say naive, but a very peace-loving, almost innocent, hopeful woman. I [saw] her grow and go through tragedy and become vengeful. And then to crawl out of that pit of despair and find an inner peace again ... it's so fulfilling to get to have that."

Pick #2: Infamous Second Son's Fetch

Fetch has moxie and isn't afraid to speak her mind, but her cool factor wasn't the only reason Bailey picked her. "That was the first time that my likeness was used on a project," she recalls. "I feel like it was early on in the evolution of motion capture, so it was still pretty fresh and the whole process was a learning experience. It was so much fun because I was shooting it obviously with Troy [Baker] and my husband, Travis [Willingham], and we just had so much fun."

Bailey remembers Fetch changing from when she first auditioned for her, making her second-guess if she would be cast. "Fetch was very different when she was first envisioned," Bailey says. "When she was first conceived, she was a bit more shy, a bit more fragile. I remember going into the audition and seeing a girl in the waiting room who looked identical to the character art. I was like, 'Oh man, she's definitely gonna get this. What a bummer!' I didn't even know it was going to look like me until we were far into the project."

She credits Sucker Punch and its willingness to hear her feedback with making Fetch the character as we know her today. "We sat down super early in the story-development process, the three of us (Troy, William, and I), and gave ideas for where we think our characters would go with things. I mean, that was a really involved process. Probably one of the most involved processes I've ever been in. So, a lot of who Fetch is came from me, which is really cool."

It got even cooler for Bailey when Fetch got her own standalone DLC called First Light. "It felt good to be the lead in something as a non-sexualized character," she says. "Fetch was powerful and complicated."

Pick #3: Gears of War 5's Kait Diaz

To say this strong-willed, capable corporal has special meaning to Bailey is an understatement. "I have a frickin' Gears tattoo on my arm," Bailey says, laughing.

"That whole recording process was just a blast because number one – working with [director] Rod Fergusson, who was amazing through the entire process. He is so much fun and really takes care of his actors. And then [fellow actors] Liam McIntyre and Eugene Byrd. We got to do most of our recording sessions together, and we really felt like a team going through it. Liam hadn't done a ton of voice work at the time, and it was fun to see his recording process and see him figure it out. It just never felt like work with that game; it always felt like I was getting to go play."

Bailey was working on both Gears 5 and The Last of Us Part II simultaneously, but then she had another important role that demanded her attention: motherhood. Bailey said Fergusson was one of the first people she told she was pregnant and she will always be grateful for how supportive he was. "I was massively pregnant when we were doing a lot of the intense battle dialogue," she says. "It has some of the most intense screams that I've ever done and pregnancy makes it so much harder to do, like just getting the breath support to do the screams, it just doesn't exist and you have to pee all the time. I probably left recording sessions every 10 minutes. And they were just so patient and understanding. They actually waited on a lot of my battle dialog until after [my son] Ronin was born because they knew it was just too difficult to get in those final months of pregnancy."

Bailey's tattoo isn't her only permanent attachment to the game. Her son will also always be connected to it, and Bailey thinks some of the Gears adrenaline might have rubbed off on him. "Ronin came out very loud, like he is one of the loudest children I've ever met. And I think it's because of Gears, because he was just inundated with battle screams, fire damage, and grenade-throwing in his entire formulation."

Pick #4: The Last of Us Part II's Abby

Abby is by far the most complex and polarizing character Bailey has played. Being cast in The Last of Us Part II was a huge and exciting moment, especially since she got to play opposite of her friend and fellow *Critical Role* castmate Ashley Johnson as Ellie. Bailey nailed the portrayal, and it brought out a lot of emotions in people – something she's still processing. "I knew that there would be backlash for sure," Bailey says. "I knew that I was going to get some hate. I didn't anticipate the extent."

Bailey thinks the leaks leading up to release didn't help. "If your first experience with that had been in the game, and then you kept moving forward, you would have had the growth and understanding," she says. "But the leaks came out a couple months in advance; you had months of people forming barriers and forming walls before they were able to understand Abby's side of it, and therefore a lot of people never were able to."

Bailey has since played the game, and can relate to people having intense feelings regarding Abby. "I knew the story; I knew what I was getting into, and when it hit 'Day One' with Abby, I still didn't like Abby," she says. "I didn't like my performance. I didn't like the character. I remember playing for like three hours into 'Day One' as Abby and talking to [my husband], Travis, and being like, 'I don't like what I did. I'm not good. This is terrible. I don't know how I was cast. All of these years of work is for nothing.' And Travis is like, 'Just shut up, go back, and keep playing because you are obviously very biased right now.' And as I continued to play, then I was like, 'Oh, okay, I just had to acclimate to myself because I didn't like me. I didn't like Abby.' You're not supposed to, you know."

The Last of Us Part II is not a happy story; it is dark, tragic, and heavy, making it a challenging place to go to day in, day out as an actor. That's why some of Bailey's favorite moments are when they shot the flashback sequences with Owen on the Ferris wheel and in the aquarium. "It felt like you were on a different project on those days because it was joyful," she says. "I think the game obviously needs those joyful moments."

However, it's the final showdown between Ellie and Abby that sticks with her the most, saying it required an extra amount of trust between her and BFF Johnson. "As painful as it was, that was so fulfilling to get to do [on stage]," she says. "Just because it was so intense and it's so rare that you get to do those kinds of things. It's kind of like *Fight Club*, where you get to have those crazy moments of aggression that normally you would never get to have and really let it out. One of the best things about being an actor is experiencing emotions that you would probably normally rein in and just letting them run free." ◈

On Her Popular Characters From Japanese Developers

Bailey voices a slew of popular characters from Japanese developers, such as Street Fighter's Chun-Li, Persona's Rise, and Fire Emblem's Lucina, and she has a lot of love for them. However, the recording process is much different for those roles. "Things like Persona and Fire Emblem have a huge fan base, and those were really important roles in everything that I've done," she says. "But because of the process that goes into recording on something like Persona or Fire Emblem, I don't get that involvement that I would get on a game like Infamous Second Son, where I created the role and grew that role from the ground up. A lot of times with projects that have come over from Japan, I'll record on Sunday for eight hours, and that's the entire breadth of my involvement on it. And while it is a really awesome role, and it resonates with a lot of people, like me personally, I didn't get to invest the time or the development into creating that. So, yeah, it's hard to choose any of those kinds of things as something that have really defined my career."

Taking On Critical Role

When Laura Bailey isn't lending her voice to the next big triple-A game, she can be found on *Critical Role*, a massively popular livestreamed web series where she plays D&D with a group of fellow voice actors, who she calls her second family. "Every single thing that we do, I always think there's no way this is going to happen," she says. "We joked about doing the animated series. We were like, 'Can you imagine if there was ever a world where we could actually have a cartoon of this?' And we laughed and laughed and then drank our beers, and then it's happening and we're making it with Amazon and there's Funkos!"

Critical Role is currently in its second campaign and even Bailey isn't sure where it's headed next, but that doesn't mean she's not dreaming about where it could go. "Honestly, I don't know," she says. "I don't know if after campaign two is done if it's another campaign from there. Like me, personally? I'd love to see a frickin' video game with our characters. How fun would that be? An RPG? Can you imagine like a Skyrim, but it's *Critical Role*? I just think it would be so much fun to see Exandria, that world that's been created, and fully run around in it."

by Ben Reeves

Trapped In Isolation

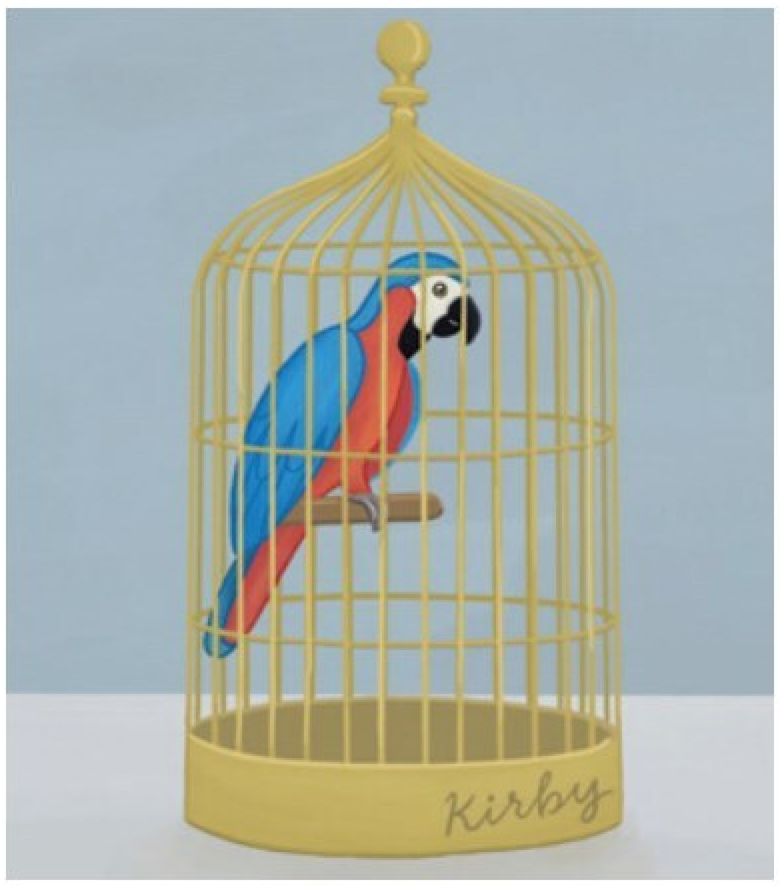
How escape rooms have found a burgeoning business in quarantine

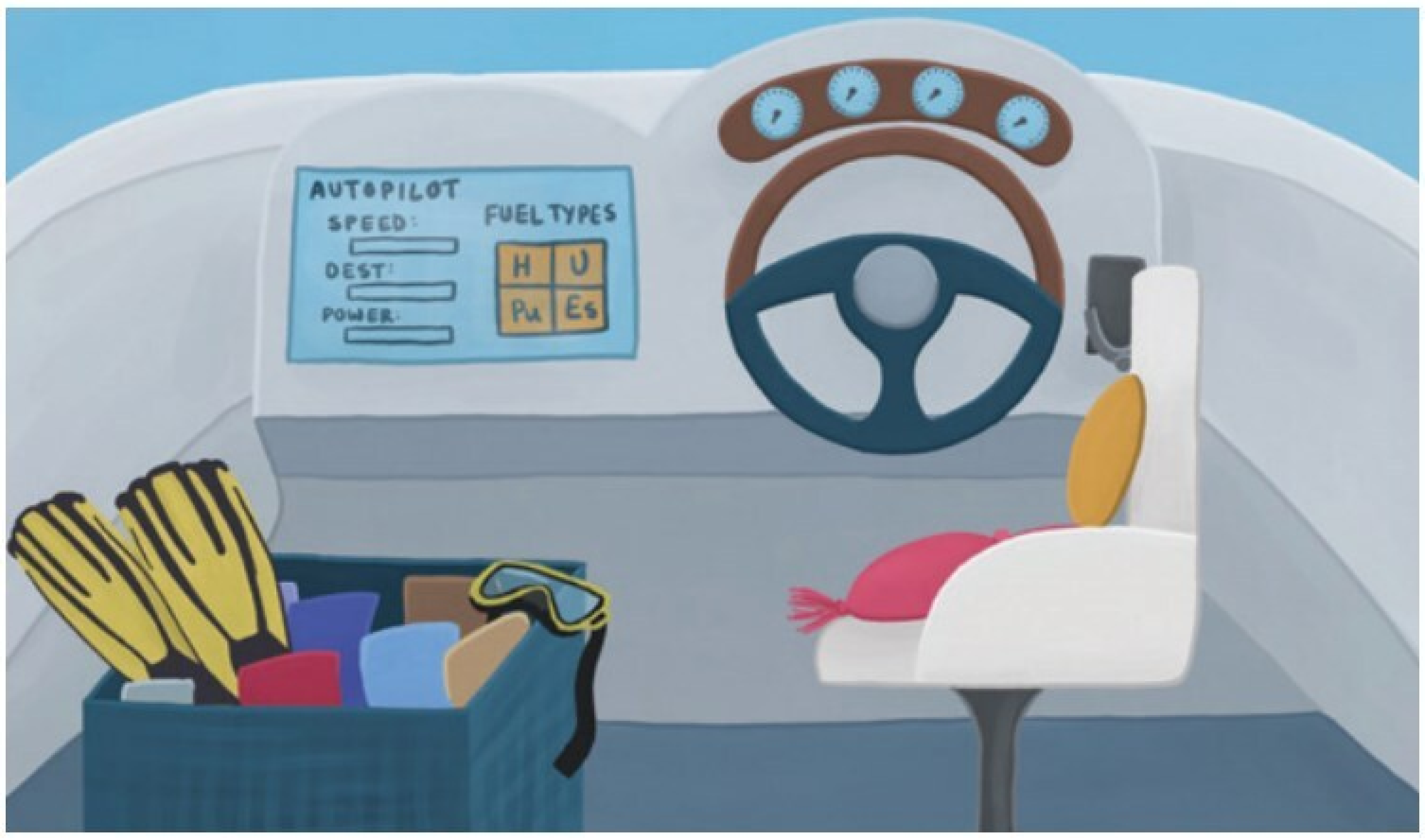
Over the past decade, escape rooms have grown from a fringe business into a multimillion-dollar industry. Last year, an unofficial count from the outlet *RoomEscapeArtist*.com reported that the United States houses more than 2,300 escape rooms – up from only 900 in 2016. But like many industries, escape rooms faced an existential threat earlier this year as the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe and puzzle rooms the world over were forced to close their doors. Then something unexpected happened: Escape rooms began to adapt, and they turned into something that looked a bit like video games.

"We were a really guest-oriented company, trying to provide epic interactive experiences in person," says Daniel Daher, digital marketing manager for The Escape Game – a Tennessee-based company that has been around for more than 6 years with over 18 different locations across the U.S. "Taking our experience into the online world wasn't a priority. We were focused on new content, on bettering our experience in-store. But once all of our stores were shut down, we said, 'Okay, well I guess we can do this virtually. We can have people play our games remotely.' Now our virtual escape rooms are killing it. They're doing better, right now, than any other store we had open."

Like many other escape rooms, people who sign up for one of The Escape Game's virtual adventures connect with a game host through video services like Zoom, where they see a live video feed of the escape room. The Escape Game employees walk through the space and interact with its various objects as players shout out orders and talk with each other, trying to solve the room's puzzles. A virtual dashboard helps players track all of the interactive objects they discover and provides insight on what puzzles they might want to solve next. It's a markedly different experience from in-person escape rooms, but after trying it firsthand we can say it works surprisingly well.

"Now we're reaching people that we never could have before," Daher says. "We had a team the other day where one person was in Egypt and another was in the United Kingdom, and they were playing together in one of our U.S. locations. We have a bunch of stories of families that are scattered across the world, literally coming together to play."





Newcomers

The pandemic has forced a lot of companies to rethink their business strategies, but it has also been an opportunity for newcomers to reinvent old ideas. Elyssa and James Warner are two creative thinkers who recently founded Paruzal Games, one of the fastest-growing escape-room companies on the market. However, unlike a lot of other organizations, Paruzal was always intended to be an online business.

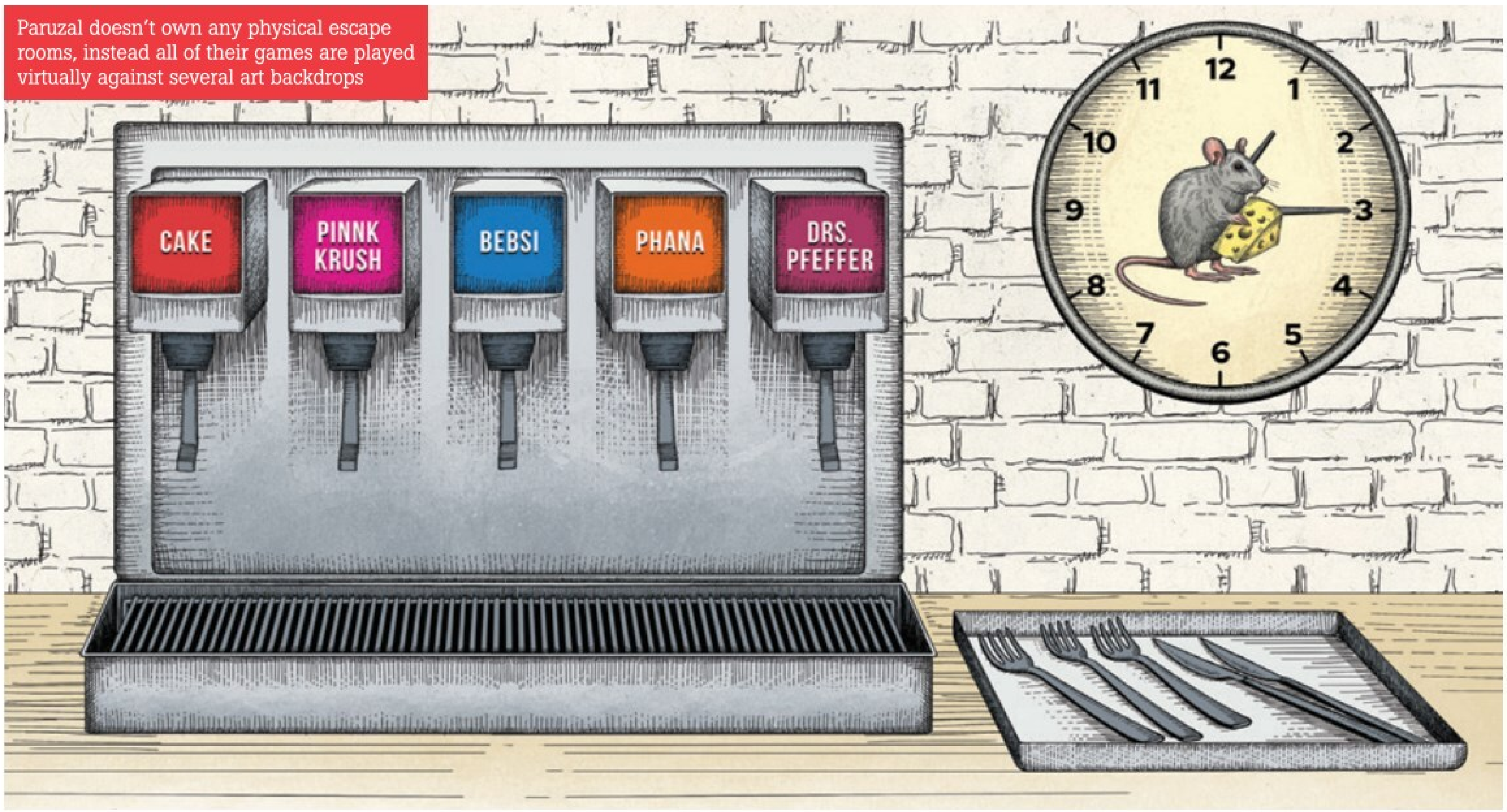
For years, Elyssa and James have exchanged presents through elaborate puzzle scavenger hunts. "One year Elyssa left me a clue that was written on a slip of paper inside a deflated balloon," James says. "But then she emptied out a section of our freezer and suspended that balloon inside a large vat of water that iced over. So, to get my clue, I had to melt this huge block of ice … It could take 12 hours for us to exchange three presents because they were always connected to these elaborate adventure hunts."

Before long, Elyssa and James' family encouraged the couple to write down these puzzle adventures and turn them into an escape-room business. By January 2020, the couple was planning to launch their company in the fall. However, when the U.S. entered quarantine in March, the Warner's moved up their timeline and launched before summer, which may have been a smart move, because their business quickly exploded. The couple needed to hire additional staff to support the thousands of virtual games they started hosting online.

Unlike traditional brick-and-mortar escape rooms, Paruzal's adventures are a bit more inventive. One adventure asks players to imagine that they are scuba diving on the bottom of the seafloor and have become trapped in a derelict pirate ship. Another adventure places puzzle-solvers at a Bruce Springsteen concert, tasking them with sneaking backstage to meet the band. Paruzal's escape games remain puzzle-oriented but also feel like a half-step between traditional escape rooms and a session of D&D.

"There's some sort of discontinuity between you telling somebody what to do while seeing it on a video feed," Elyssa says, referencing traditional escape rooms that have gone digital. "Whereas, our format is meant to be played as it is. It's not trying to be something else. For a lot of people, including myself, that makes for a smoother experience, because you're not getting frustrated by the lag of the video or trying to tell a human what to do in a room that you'd really rather be in physically."

As escape rooms continue to move toward digital experiences, they have started to look a little more like video games, but they haven't lost their social aspect. Everyone we talked to for this story remarked on how encouraging it has been to see people from all walks of life – and from all corners of the globe – come together and enjoy a game. One company even shared a story about how a group of children from a school for deaf students were able to play together as a group in a way that wasn't possible in person. In a time where our daily lives feel increasingly isolated, this new era of escape rooms provides an opportunity for many to escape together. ◆



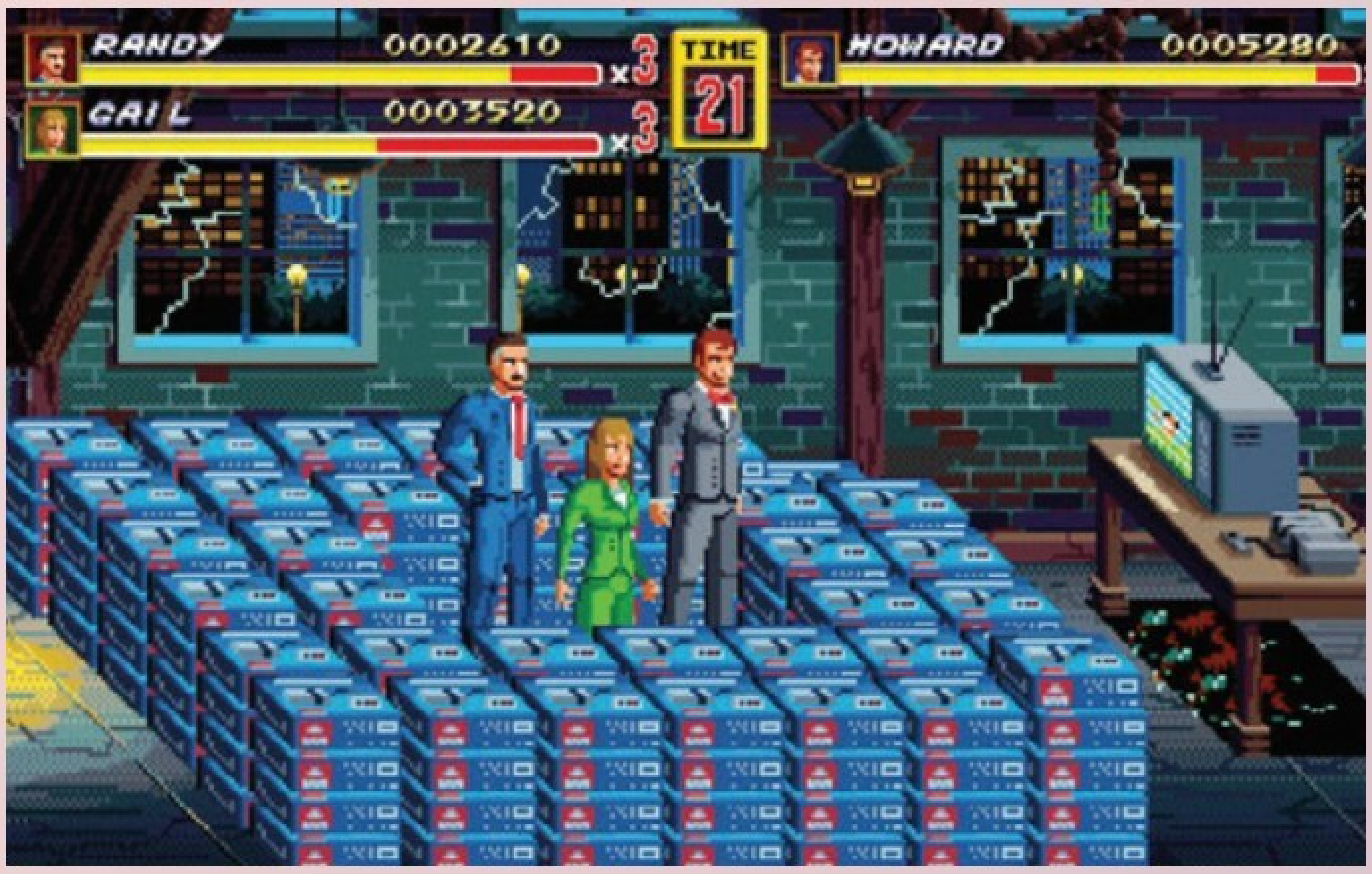
Paruzal doesn't own any physical escape rooms, instead all of their games are played virtually against several art backdrops

DOCUMENTARIES, NOW!

Check out three great gaming docs that debuted over the past few months

The video game industry has a fascinating history filled with equally interesting – and polarizing – personalities. It should come as no surprise that a number of documentaries have tapped into the topic over the years, considering the built-in dramatic possibilities. Several films made a big impact on audiences, such as *King of Kong*'s David vs. Goliath tale of high-score rivalries in Donkey Kong or *Indie Game: The Movie*'s focus on the trials and tribulations of independent game development. It doesn't look like filmmakers have run out of ideas, either. Over the past few months, several notable docs have launched. Better still, they're available to stream, so you can check them out without leaving the comfort (and safety) of your own home. ***by Jeff Cork***

Console Wars

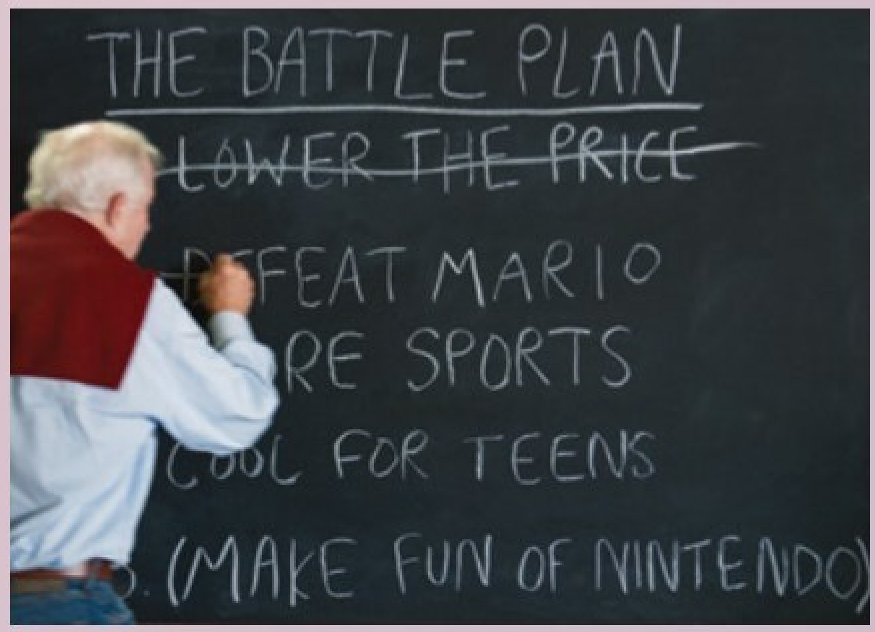


Blake J. Harris' 2014 book of the same name was a deeply researched look into the heated rivalry between Sega and Nintendo. It was an important era that set the table for game-violence controversies and the formation of ESRB ratings, taunting marketing ("Genesis Does What Nintendon't," anyone?), and a relentless sequence of corporate infighting and double-crosses. Harris returns to these fraught times in this documentary, sharing directing and producing duties with Jonah Tulis.

The documentary includes input from nearly all of the major players, with a cast of interview subjects such as former Sega of America president and CEO Tom Kalinkse; and former Nintendo of America chairman Howard Lincoln. Events are told with archival footage, animated sequences, and conversations with the people who were there as history unfolded. It's an engaging history lesson that's interesting whether you were glued to your consoles back in the day or have an interest in learning a bit more about what happened in the early years of console competition.

Streaming on CBS All Access

High Score



This docuseries is an engaging and accessible look at gaming history, told over the course of six themed episodes. It's definitely the flashiest doc here, with an abundance of pixelated animations and a narration from the voice of Mario, Charles Martinet. It covers a ton of history, starting from the early experiments with interactive video in the 1970s up to and including the rise of 3D gaming.

While well-known stories are told, *High Score* also does a great job of highlighting some of the personalities who haven't gotten their due. The spotlight covers familiar territory such as the early days of Nintendo and the Mortal Kombat controversy, but it also shines down at people such as engineer Jerry Lawson, who helped to develop the first game cartridge, and Rebecca Ann Heineman, who was the first esports champ back in the days of Space Invaders. Even if you consider yourself an expert, you're likely to learn a thing or two over the course of the show – while having a great time.

Streaming on Netflix

Not For Resale

Not for Resale uses the shift from physical games to digital distribution to tell a wider story about gaming's past and future, accompanied by an original score from Neil Cicierega. Kevin J. James' film doesn't sizzle with the visual energy as the other picks on this list, but it provides a contemplative look at what we may be losing as we move away from discs and cartridges. And as it turns out, it's a lot.

Well-known figures including Greg Miller and Frank Cifaldi weigh in on digital distribution and game preservation, but the real stars of the show are the owners of more than a dozen different independent game stores across North America. Through interviews and in-store tours, we get a sense of how these mom and pop operations are doing their best to stick around as the industry seems to be moving past them. It's a meandering narrative, but also provides some insight on collectors and the joy of sharing history with a new generation of fans.

On Blu-ray and streaming on a variety of platforms; visit gamestoredoc.com/screenings ◆

YOUR ULTIMATE NEXT-GEN STARTER GUIDE

by Ben Reeves

1

1 Razer Wolverine V2

Third-party controllers used to be a total joke, but that is no longer the case. A great example is Razer's Wolverine V2 for the Xbox Series X/S. Razer's redesigned ergonomics feel even more comfortable than before. All of the Wolverine V2's buttons are remappable so you can customize your layout, and the triggers feature a hair-trigger mode for ultimate precision. Razer's expertise in mechanical switch technology was even leveraged to deliver lightning fast inputs with a life cycle of up to 3-million taps, so this controller could outlive your new console.

$99.99 | razer.com

2 Secretlab Titan Series Gaming Chair

Gaming isn't hard work, but sitting in one place all day can wear on your body if you don't have the right seat. We're still fond of Herman Miller x Logitech G's Embody Gaming Chair, but if you're looking for something a little more budget-friendly, Secretlab's Titan Series gaming chair is nearly as comfortable for a third of the cost. Plus, you can customize everything from the fabric used in the upholstery to the game logos featured on the back.

$459 | secretlab.co

2

3 Turtle Beach Stealth 700 Gen 2 Gaming Headset

Don't bother setting up an expensive surround sound system; Turtle Beach's DTS Headphone:X technology uses 3D audio to create a 7.1 channel soundstage around your ears. In addition to crystal-clear audio, the Stealth 700's microphone offers active noise-cancellation, and the headset lets you adjust your game and chat audio separately. Turtle Beach has two versions of the Stealth 700, branded to work with either PS4 or Xbox One consoles, but these headsets are already next-gen ready and should work with your new consoles on day one.

$149 | turtlebeach.com

4 Seagate Storage Expansion Card for Xbox Series X/S 1TB

The Xbox Series X's internal 1TB storage drive might sound large now, but have you seen how Call of Duty's installs grow year after year? Games keep getting bigger, and that drive is going to fill up faster than you think. Fortunately, you can double the size of your system's storage with Seagate's simple plug-and-play expansion card, which features an additional terabyte of storage.

$219 | seagate.com

5 Sony DualSense Charging Station

Like Sony's previous controllers, the PS5 DualSense features an internal battery, so if you want uninterrupted cord-free gaming, you might want to keep a second controller charging at all times. Sony's charging station allows up to two controllers to charge at any given time and the unit's click-in design lets you know when the controllers are firmly set in the cradle.

$29.99 | direct.playstation.com

6 Samsung Q80T QLED 65-Inch 4K Television

Sure, the name is a mouthful, but once your eyes get a good look at Samsung's impressive picture quality, you won't even be able to talk. The Q80T's backlight system automatically adjusts your picture's contrast, providing deeper blacks and brighter whites while an internal Quantum processor optimizes the rest of your 4K picture, creating images that are almost lifelike. If you still haven't upgraded to 4K, this television will help you get the most out of your new consoles.

$1,799 | samsung.com

Media Shelf

FANGS
SARAH ANDERSEN
THE HISTORY OF EC COMICS
THE TOWER OF FOOLS
ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

FANGS BY SARAH ANDERSEN

This *New York Times* bestseller tells a humorous and often sweet love story about a vampire and a werewolf who learn to sort out the differences between their macabre lifestyles. Originally a webcomic series, this deluxe hardcover edition features an engraved cloth cover.

$14.99
simonandschuster.com

THE HISTORY OF EC COMICS

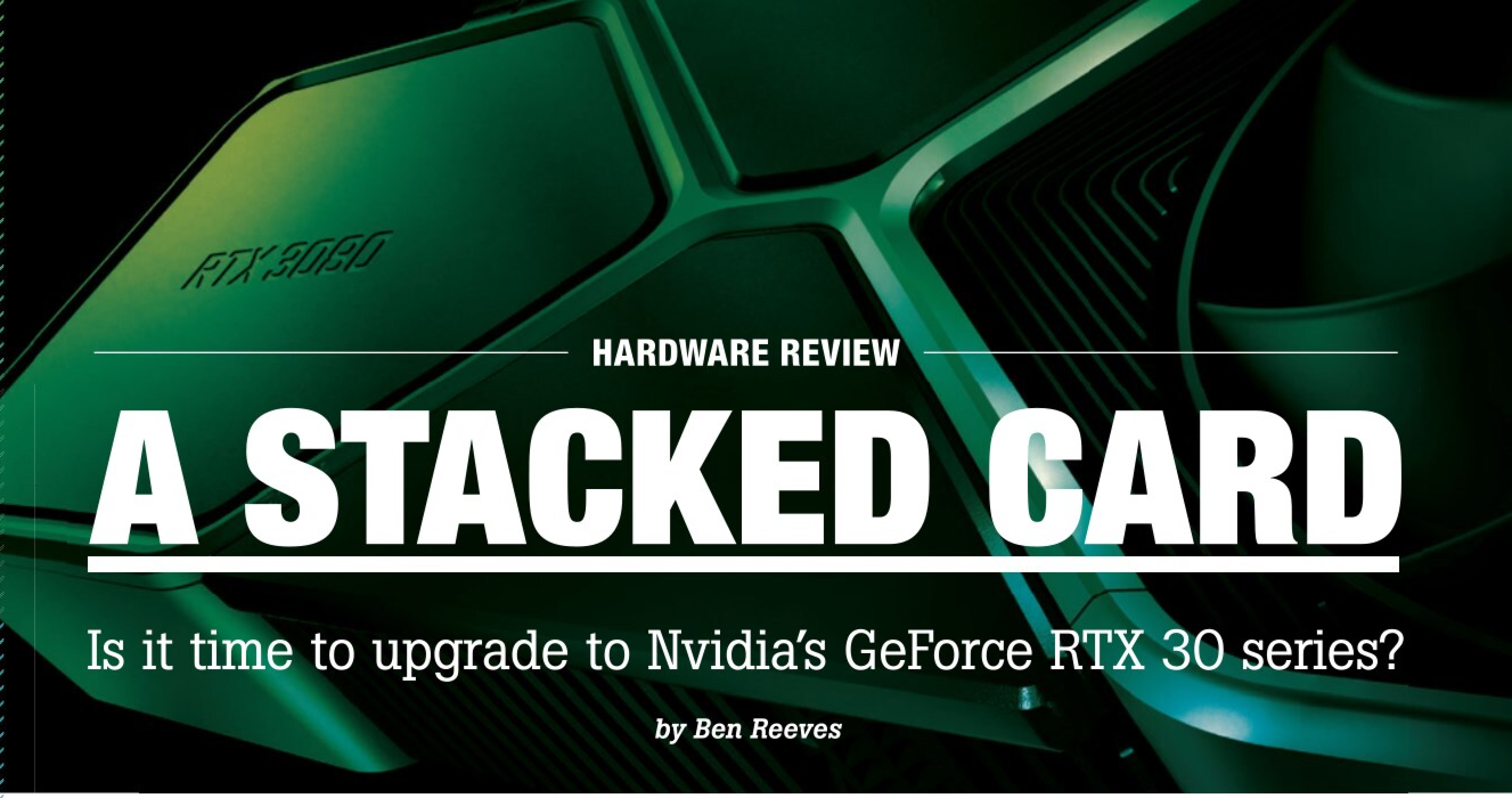
Comic books aren't only about superheroes. This thoroughly-researched hardcover coffee table book details how one fledgling publishing company in the '40s reinvented the comic book with creepy titles like *Tales from the Crypt*, *Weird Science*, and *MAD*.

$200
taschen.com

THE TOWER OF FOOLS BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

This new series from the creator of the Witcher is a historical fantasy adventure starring a crafty magician, Reynevan, who finds himself on the lamb when he becomes the target of a brotherhood of holy inquisitors.

$9.99
hachettebookgroup.com



HARDWARE REVIEW

A STACKED CARD

Is it time to upgrade to Nvidia's GeForce RTX 30 series?

by Ben Reeves

The next generation of consoles is here and millions of gamers are wrestling with the decision of which console to buy. But there is a third option: upgrade your PC. Nvidia recently announced its RTX 30 series of graphics cards, which feature up to 28 billion transistors, making them immensely powerful. Nvidia touted its new cards' realistic ray-traced graphics and boasted that the new cards were twice as fast as those in its RTX 20 series. We got our hands on a GeForce RTX 3080 and put the chipset through its paces.

Nvidia's new line of GeForce RTX cards comes in three flavors. First, the baseline 3070, which is the cheapest as well as the slowest. But in this case, slow is relative as the 3070 is still one of the fastest cards on the market, capable of running high-end games at speeds of up to 100 frames per second. The RTX 3080 is the upgraded version for those with 4K displays, while the RTX 3090 is so overpowered that unless you have an 8K monitor, you probably don't need it.

We spent a lot of time with the RTX 3080 – which feels like it should be the go-to model for most users – and noticed a performance boost of around 20 to 70 percent over last-gen cards. This isn't nearly as good as Nvidia's promise of 2X, but it's still quite impressive. In the end, the main thing you need to know is how Nvidia's new tech performs while gaming, and our 3080 never stumbled. We played Assassin's Creed Odyssey on Ultra settings with a smooth 61fps, even at 4K. Meanwhile, Rise of the Tomb Raider on Ultra at 4K sustained 100 fps. Even Microsoft Flight Simulator, which is incredibly taxing for some machines, ran just fine on Ultra at 4K, maintaining 40 fps.

Nvidia's newest cards are powerhouses, but there are a few things you should know before you upgrade. Most importantly, these new cards use a 12-pin power connector. Nvidia's Founders Edition ships with an 8-to-12 pin converter, so this might not be an issue. However, make sure your power supply is up to the task, as Nvidia has also boosted its recommended power supply rating to 750 watts to compensate for the extra power draw. Second, the RTX cards are big: the 3080 measures 11.2-inches by 4.4-inches with a standard 2-slot height, so double check that your PC can house a card of this size, as it might be a tight squeeze for compact machines. Finally, you want a monitor that makes use of all this horsepower. If you don't have at least a 4K display, you likely won't notice the 3080's extra juice.

Nvidia's GeForce RTX 30 series is a big leap forward for PC gaming. Sure, the 3080 costs more by itself than an entirely new console, but it's hard to argue with its performance. If you're looking to upgrade your gaming PC, Nvidia's RTX 30 cards are a great way to futureproof your machine for the next several years.

$499 (3070), $699 (3080), $1,499 (3090) | nvidia.com

Pre-Built Machines

We asked our friends at both Origin and Digital Storm to put together systems with the new RTX cards, which we used during our tests. If you're looking for more than just a new graphics card and need a whole new PC, both of these machines are great starter systems.

Digital Storm System

CPU: Intel Core i9-10900K
GPU: GeForce RTX 3080 10GB
Memory: 32GB DDR4 3000MHz Corsair Vengeance RGB Pro
Storage: 1x SSD M.2 (1TB Samsung 970 EVO PLUS) + 1x Storage (2TB Seagate HDD)
Cooling: Digital Storm 240mm AIO
MSRP as configured: $3,251

digitalstorm.com

Origin Chronos

CPU: Intel Core i7 10700K 8-Core 3.6GHz (4.9GHz TurboBoost)
GPU: GeForce RTX 3080 10GB
Memory: 16GB Corsair Vengeance RGB Pro 3200MHz (2x8GB)
Storage: 1TB Samsung 870 QVO Series
Cooling: Corsair H60 Hydro Series 120mm
MSRP as configured: $3,200

originpc.com

DISNEY TABLETOP GAMES TO SHARE WITH THE FAMILY

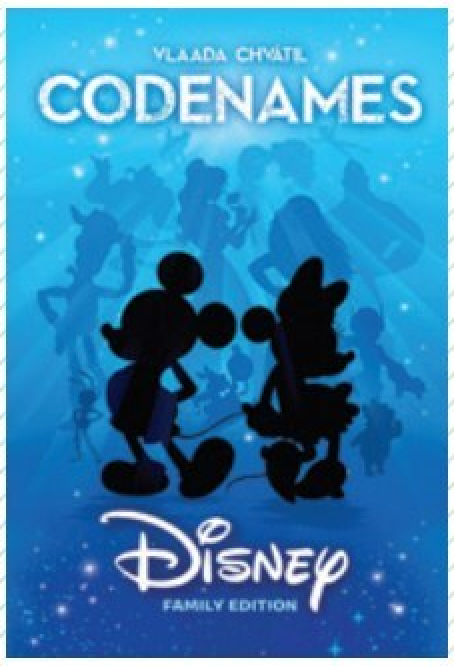
As we round the corner into the holidays, it's a great time to find shared activities that can bring the family together. The house the mouse built has an impressive variety of tabletop properties to enjoy. Check out one of these options for your next family game night, and ensure that kids and adults have a good time. ***by Matt Miller***

The Haunted Mansion
Disney
Call of the Spirits Game
Ages 8+
2-6 Players

HAUNTED MANSION: CALL OF THE SPIRITS

Publisher: Funko Games

If the beloved Disney park attraction is a favorite for your household, you can't go wrong with this eerily amusing adventure. Players wander the familiar rooms (and graves) of the Haunted Mansion, socializing with the ghosts they meet along the way to earn points – just don't let the hitchhiking ghosts follow you home!



CODENAMES: DISNEY

Publisher: The Op, Czech Games Edition

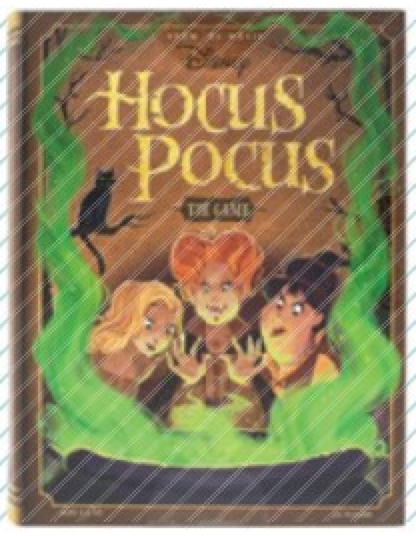
Ideal for big groups, two teams compete to guess the correct words or pictures linked together by a single shared clue. Codenames is one of the best and most approachable games of the last decade; the addition of familiar Disney characters and locales is a perfect fit.

Marvel
Infinity Gauntlet
A Love Letter Game

INFINITY GAUNTLET: A LOVE LETTER GAME

Publisher: Z-Man Games

The simple structure of the original Love Letter challenged players to get a secret note to a well-protected princess. Clever reworking leads to a fast-playing one-vs-many card game, in which heroes like Spider-Man and Thor try to halt the machinations of Thanos. Perfect for a 15-minute playtime between other activities.



HOCUS POCUS: THE GAME

Publisher: Ravensburger

Based on the cult classic Halloween film, this cooperative challenge is perfect for groups in which one or more players might get frustrated by more competitive experiences. Players work together to line up the correct sequence of cards in the cauldron to stun the witches, but at any one time, you have incomplete information about other players' card hands, leading to lots of fun and tense guesswork.

Disney
Villainous
The worst takes it all.

VILLAINOUS

Publisher: Ravensburger

Take a walk on the dark side with this delightful role flip, in which players take on the roles of evildoers like Jafar, Ursula, and Maleficent, competing to be the first to enact their dastardly plan. The asymmetric play lends tons of replay value, since each baddie plays differently from the others. Expansions add more sinister faces, and there's now even a Marvel version with villains like Hela and Ultron.

Star Wars
Outer Rim

STAR WARS: OUTER RIM

Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games

This more involved strategic adventure is a chance to embrace your inner scoundrel in that galaxy far, far away. Players assume the role of Han Solo, Jyn Erso, Boba Fett, and others as they take on jobs, upgrade iconic ships, and collect bounties – all in pursuit of galactic fame (or infamy). It's a richly imagined twist on the Star Wars universe that captures the less savory side of the fiction.

Splendor
Marvel

SPLENDOR MARVEL

Publisher: Space Cowboys

The original (and excellent) Splendor was a game all about collecting gems, so it's only appropriate that the new Marvel twist on the formula focuses on collecting the Infinity Stones to put a halt to Thanos. Recruit cards representing recognizable Marvel heavyweights with your multi-color tokens, and get a taste for the card drafting and set collection mechanics that show up in tons of other games.

For an expanded look at these games, and even more great Disney tabletop projects, visit gameinformer.com/topofthetable

GODS AND MONSTERS OF THE SHELF

These mythic collectibles are ready to dominate your display space and offer a potent challenge to any hero who dares face them

by Matt Miller

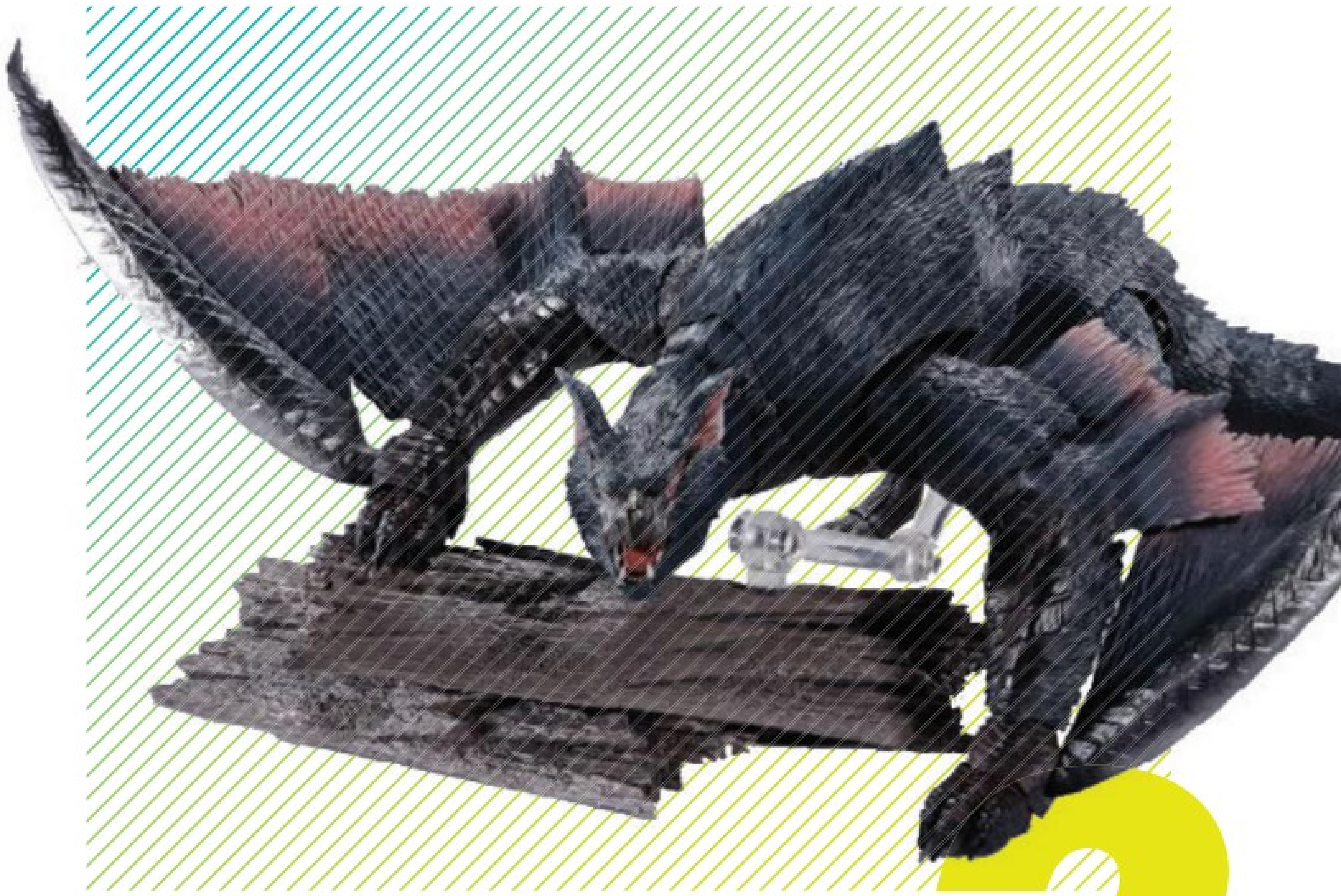
1

ULTIMA, THE HIGH SERAPH

The towering boss from Final Fantasy XIV is presented with exquisite detail in this statue, recreating her appearance in the Orbonne Monastery raid of Stormblood. A dedicated team of Japanese sculptors have shaped the intricate patterns and hybrid nature of this memorable foe, balancing delicate structures with a sense of motion, intensity, and power.

$229 | ***store.na.square-enix-games.com***

2



MONSTER HUNTER WORLD NARGACUGA

Hunters of any rank should be excited to confront the terrifying visage of Nargacuga as it appears in Monster Hunter World: Iceborne. The nearly foot-long wyvern is especially flexible in its display options, thanks to interchangeable tails, eyes, a tree base, and even an unpainted miniature hunter figure who has the gall to sever the big guy's tail.

$79.99 | ***shma-articulationseries.com***

3

ALIEN 40TH ANNIVERSARY FIGURE

H.R. Giger's alien first terrorized the crew of the *Nostromo* way back in 1979, and the second wave of 7-inch figures from the film look amazing. High poseability and gruesome detail work do justice to the seminal bloody Xenomorph monster that helped define a whole era of science fiction.

$24.99 | ***necaonline.com***

4

GALACTUS THE DEVOURER

As much a display piece as a game piece, the Galactus HeroClix figure is a colossal miniature that is fully compatible with your HeroClix tabletop game. Even outside of battle, the figure impresses, thanks to this godlike being's towering 12-inch+ height, blazing energy blasts, and even an optional helmetless head.

$99.99 | ***wizkids.com***

5

LEGENDS IN 3D CTHULHU BUST

The Sleeper of R'lyeh is here to haunt your dreams as an incredibly detailed 10-inch bust. Intricate sculpting brings the Great Old One at the center of the Lovecraftian mythos to life. It's a perfect centerpiece for any horror collection.

$175 | ***diamondselecttoys.com***

THE MANDALORIAN TAKES OVER TOY STORES

by Andrew Reiner

LIFE-SIZE

THE CHILD

Dozens of different The Child toys are available for purchase, but the prize of the collection is a life-size replica from Sideshow Collectibles. It stands in at 16.5" (which is 1:1 scale), comes with a stand, and is expected to be available early next year.

$375 | sideshow.com

SPEEDER BIKE SET

The 50-year-old child we lovingly call Baby Yoda spent some time in a bag. That moment can be remembered fondly in the new Black Series action-figure set, which consists of a scout trooper, white speeder bike, and The Child in a sack.

$49.99 | hasbro.com

THE MANDALORIAN RETRO COLLECTION

If you grew up in the 1970s, your *Star Wars* toys looked a lot like this new Mandalorian line of action figures. This new retro series features old-school packaging, and consists of six figures: Mando, The Child, IG-11, Cara Dune, Moff Gideon, and Kuill. They won't be on store shelves until spring, but you can secure yours today by preordering. ◆

$12.99 (each) | hasbro.com

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Disney
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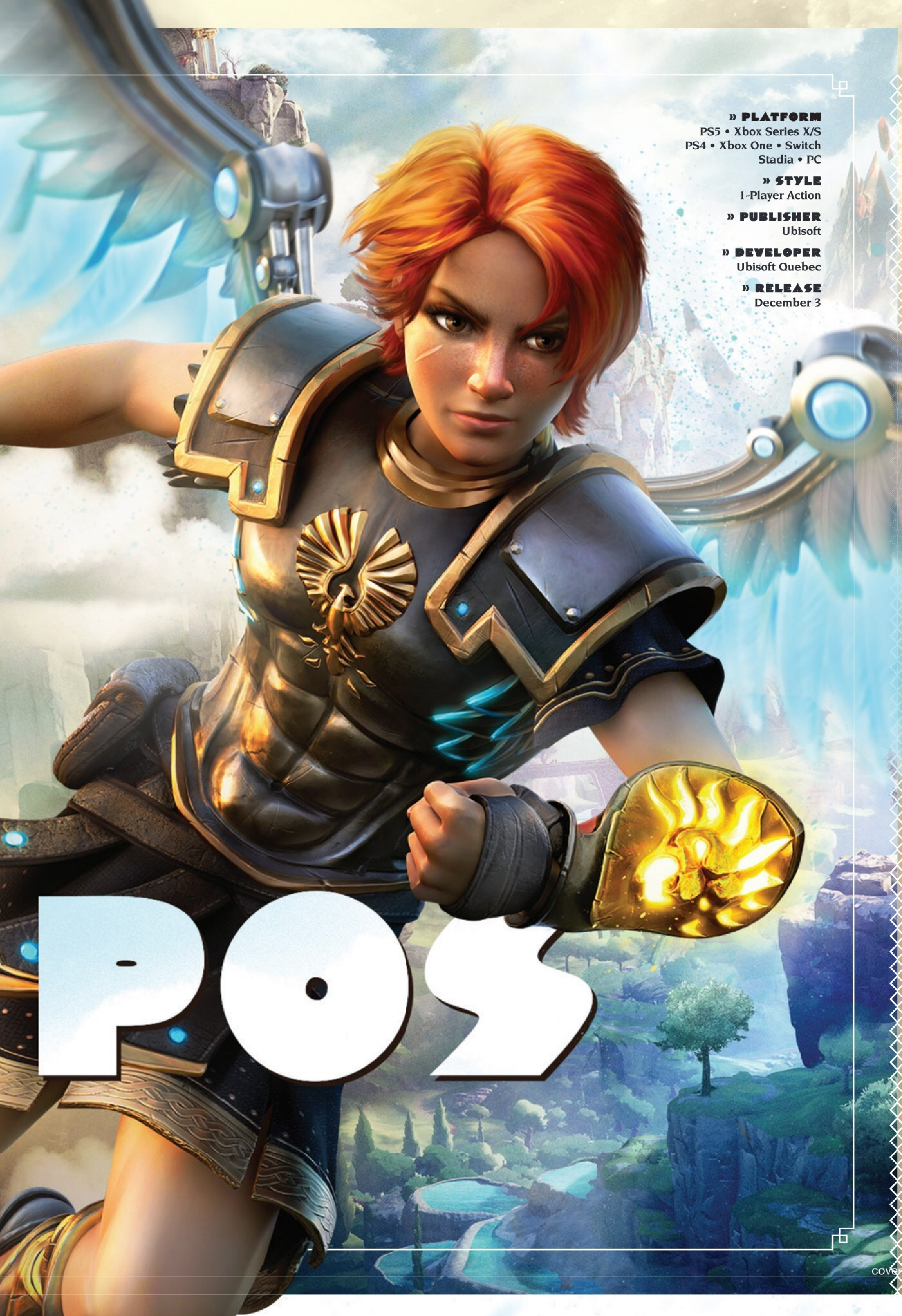
How **Immortals Fenyx Rising** hopes to become Ubisoft's next epic hit

ASCENDING TO OLYM

by

BRIAN SHEA



» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Stadia • PC

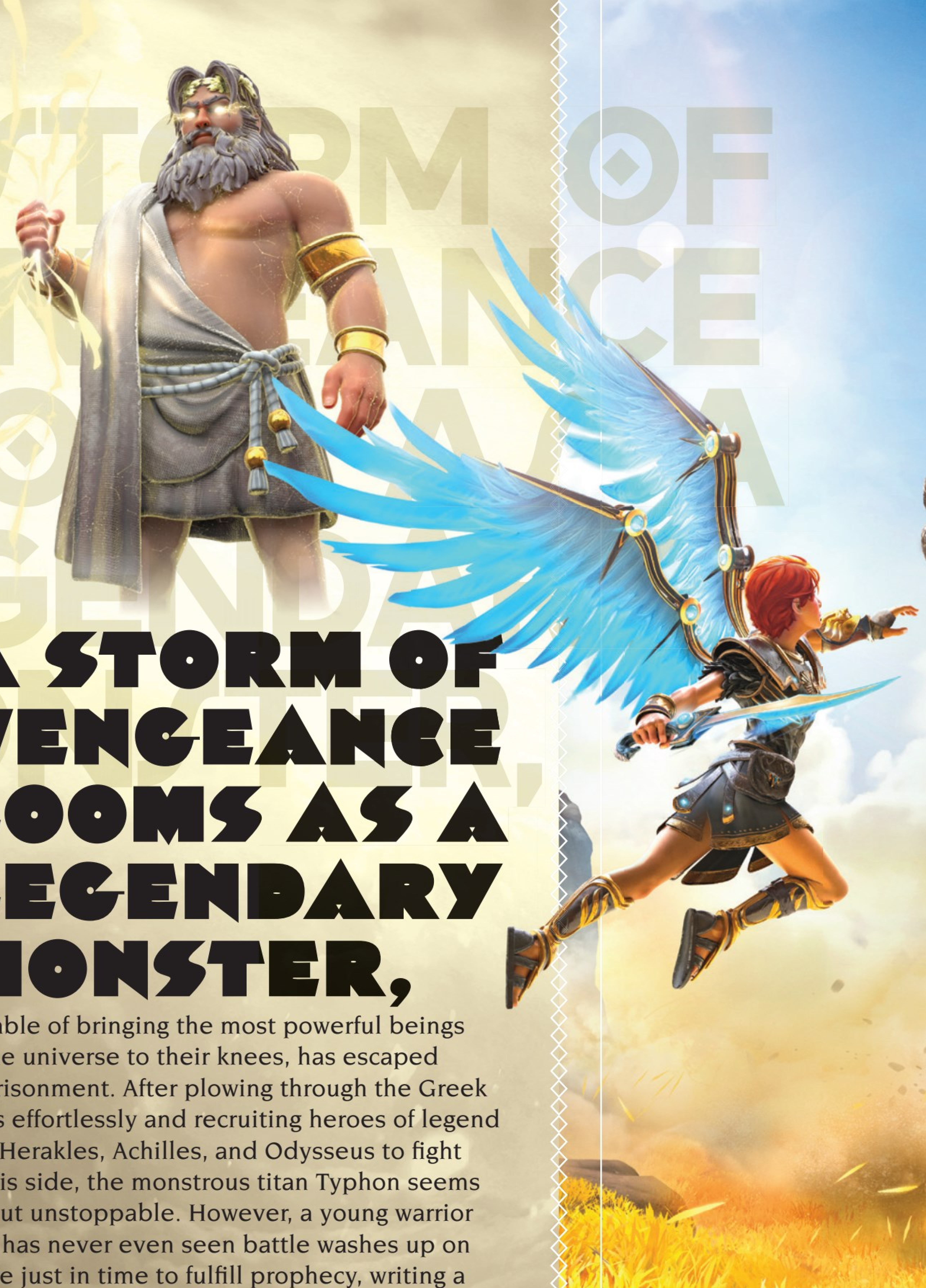
» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Quebec

» RELEASE
December 3

POS



A STORM OF VENGEANCE LOOMS AS A LEGENDARY MONSTER,

A STORM OF VENGEANCE LOOMS AS A LEGENDARY MONSTER,

capable of bringing the most powerful beings in the universe to their knees, has escaped imprisonment. After plowing through the Greek gods effortlessly and recruiting heroes of legend like Herakles, Achilles, and Odysseus to fight by his side, the monstrous titan Typhon seems all but unstoppable. However, a young warrior who has never even seen battle washes up on shore just in time to fulfill prophecy, writing a new (often humorous) legend worth retelling for generations to come.

THE GENESIS OF SOMETHING NEW

Coming off the critically acclaimed Assassin's Creed Syndicate and Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Ubisoft Quebec wanted to chart its own course. Already well-versed in Greek history and mythology from its work on Odyssey, the team decided to capitalize on its knowledge, creating a new adventure separate from the Assassin's Creed franchise that focuses solely on the gods, titans, and mythological figures of ancient Greece.

While leveraging the team's knowledge of the era and myths might seem like a no-brainer, a glitch that occurred during the development of Assassin's Creed Odyssey actually gave the studio its first kernel of inspiration. "There was a bug at the time where you'd be sailing on your trireme and instead of having a normal human crew, you'd have a crew of cyclops," says game director Scott Phillips. "We knew that was wrong for Odyssey, but it also sparked this idea of, 'Actually it would be quite cool if we can break those historical bonds and just go full force into mythology.'"

Ubisoft Quebec got to dig deeper into mythology with the Fate of Atlantis expansion for Assassin's Creed Odyssey, where the protagonist traveled into the world of the Greek gods, but the team hungered for more. It wanted to create something unique and new, free from the constraints of a well-established franchise. "We were using the Greek mythology, but within the limit of the brand and the mythology of the brand more than the Greek mythology," associate game director Julien Galloudec says. "For Immortals Fenyx Rising, it was the other way around: We wanted to embrace the Greek mythology."

Drawing inspiration from films like *The Princess Bride* and *Howl's Moving Castle* and games like Devil May Cry, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, and Portal, Ubisoft Quebec began creating a new game with the open-world exploration and action players had grown accustomed to in Assassin's Creed Odyssey. However, the formula needed to be presented in a different way, with puzzles and humor stepping into the forefront rather than being pushed into peripheral roles. The result is Immortals Fenyx Rising, a game where the studio thinks it can truly spread its wings and take flight.

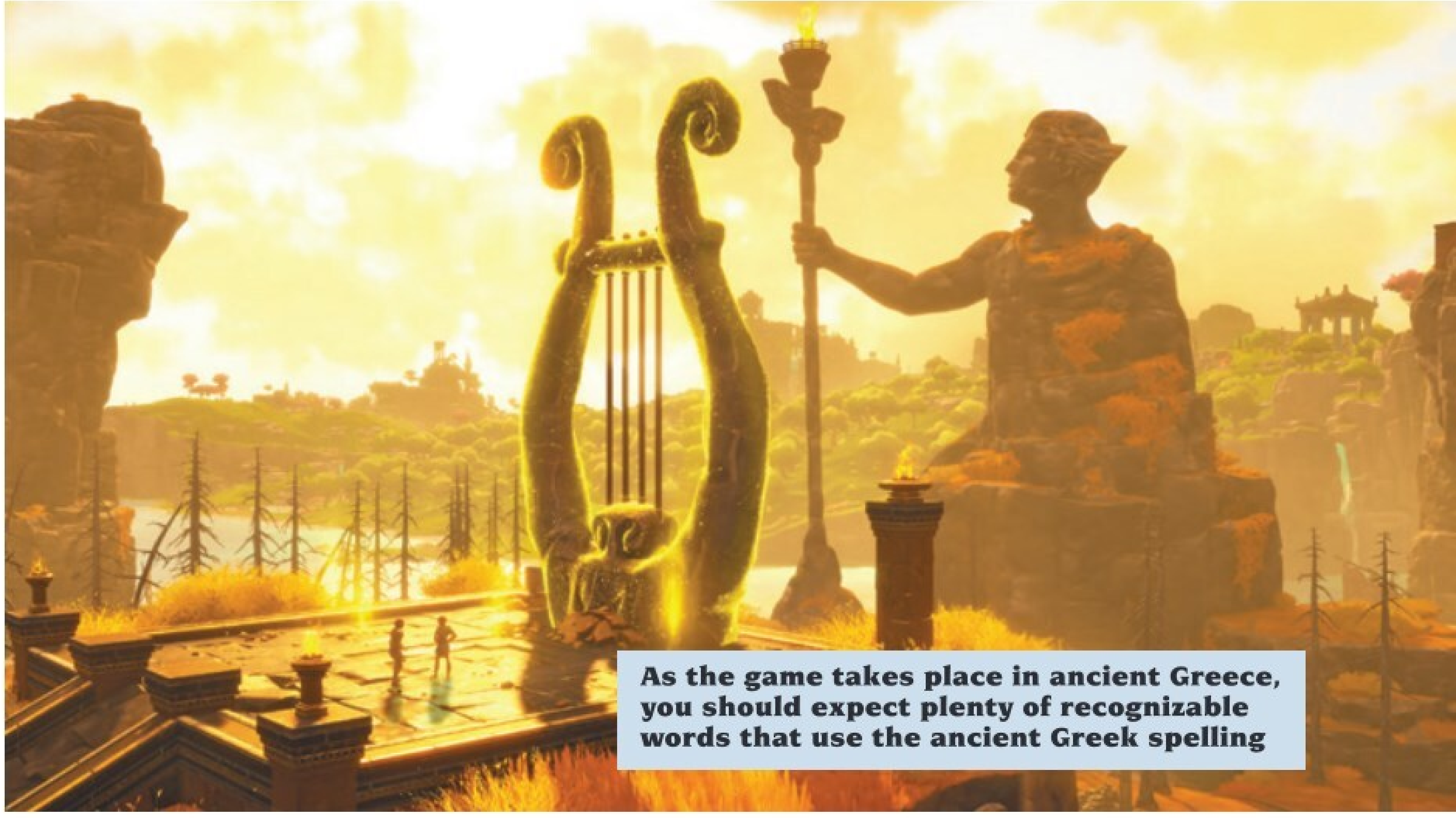
SPILLING DIVINE BLOOD

When Immortals Fenyx Rising begins, the first voice you hear is that of Typhon, the youngest of all the titans. The powerful monster has broken free from a mountain under which he was imprisoned by Zeus, and now he's out for blood. Not only does he want to take down the gods of Olympos, but he wants to reimagine the world in his image, one without the selfish and cruel deities.

"Within Greek mythology, Typhon is sort of the ultimate enemy of the gods; he's the sum of all their fears," Phillips says. "He's threatening essentially the destruction of humanity and the destruction of the gods."

Typhon, who encapsulates the power of all the other titans, has a particular bone to pick with the chief god, Zeus. In a previous battle for Olympos, Zeus defeated the titans and trapped Typhon under a mountain. Thousands of years have passed, and Typhon has escaped with a fiery need for vengeance. When he burst out of the mountain, he sent shockwaves through the island, opening cracks to Tartaros, the dark, hellish part of Hades' realm that imprisons the dead who deserve punishment, as well as the titans from the previous attack. These gateways between Tartaros and Earth allowed those creatures to escape into the world while Typhon staged a devastating attack on Mount Olympos.

During the attack, it became obvious the gods didn't stand a chance against Typhon's encroaching forces. Some, like Hermes, fled, while the others fought a losing battle. Typhon blew through the remaining gods and severed them from their essences, fundamentally transforming them. The gods tried one last-ditch effort, summoning legendary heroes of mythology, but Typhon was able to enslave them to fight for him.

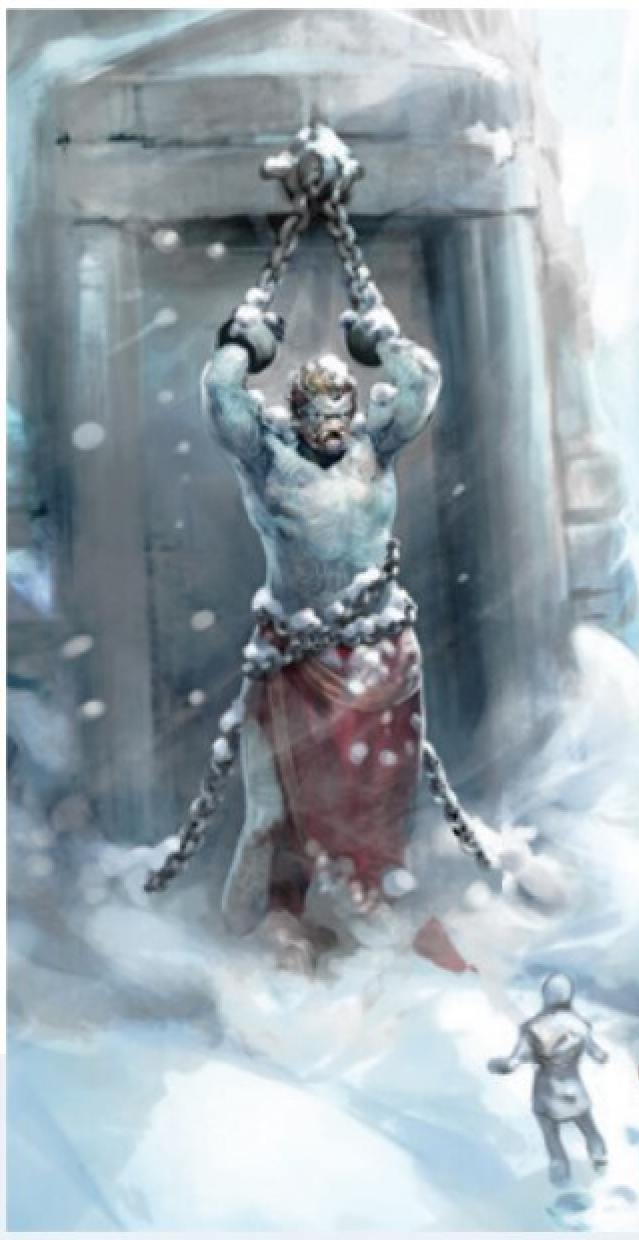


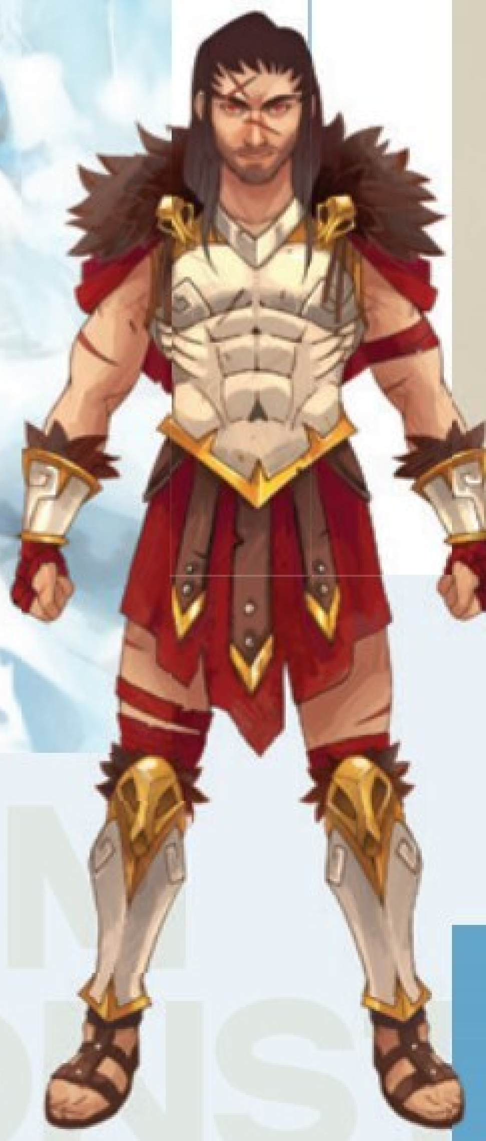
As the game takes place in ancient Greece, you should expect plenty of recognizable words that use the ancient Greek spelling

"He's trying to improve the world and make it a better, more sane place, make it less chaotic, and make everything work as opposed to being ruled by messy narcissists," says narrative director and lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem. "He's a complex character, and I definitely think there's some stuff that he wants to implement in the world that's pretty great. How he goes about that, though, maybe leaves something to be desired."

Despite Typhon's desire to improve the world and take revenge on the gods for for some of the awful things they've done, we shouldn't expect the story of Immortals Fenyx Rising to approach him with a degree of sympathy. "I think you could maybe look at it in the Marvel Thanos way, but we don't necessarily approach Thanos in that level that he's potentially a good guy," Phillips says.

The only hope to defeat Typhon is to reunite the gods with their essences, restore them to their original forms, and rally them to defeat Typhon before he unleashes his wrath upon the world.





THE GOD COUPLE

The game is narrated by Prometheus and Zeus, who describe the events that are unfolding in humorous fashion. The banter between the two is full of petty jabs and jokes at the expense of each other, as well as mortals in general, effectively establishing a strong sense of humor in the journey.

"I felt like a lot of video games are incredibly dark, and I had missed this feeling from childhood that movies like *The Princess Bride* or *Naked Gun* or *Airplane* had given me; I felt like, 'Why can't a video game have that kind of tone?'" Yohalem says. "It got tipped in that direction by the fact that Greek mythology is actually full of comedy. Unlike our religion today, which is seen as a moral compass where everything is very serious and is how you should act if you were a perfect person or a perfect deity. For the Greeks, their mythology was like their soap opera or their reality television, where you're seeing people who are just like us making mistakes and you're learning from the things in the stories that result in tragedy."

To say Prometheus and Zeus have a complicated relationship would be an understatement; when the titans and gods clashed for the first time, Prometheus was one of the few titans who sided with the gods, so the two are basically old war buddies as well as cousins. However, the relationship soured when Prometheus fell in love with humanity and stole fire from Olympos to give to the humans. To punish Prometheus for this betrayal, Zeus chained him to the side of a mountain and has an eagle peck out his liver every day before it regenerates every night. However, the Typhon crisis made them realize they need each other.

Prometheus summons Zeus to the mountainside to try and figure out a way to deal with Typhon, but even the ruler of the gods is affected by Typhon's return. On top of the gods being defeated, the monster has stolen Zeus' lightning bolts and turned the mortals to stone. Zeus clearly has disdain for mortals, whom he calls "evil parasites," but Prometheus tells Zeus that a mortal named Fenyx may be the only hope for the gods in the fight against Typhon. And thus begins the story of Fenyx.

RISING FROM GODS & MONSTERS

When Immortals Fenyx Rising was announced at E3 2019, it was known as Gods & Monsters. However, after a delay from February to December, the title re-emerged as Immortals Fenyx Rising.

When the decision was made to delay the game, the development team at Ubisoft Quebec had everyone play the existing title and fill out a survey to provide feedback for what could be done better. The team used that to make myriad tweaks to the gameplay, narrative, and visuals. "There's no video game developer that will ever tell you that they don't want more time," says game director Scott Phillips. "We took that time and I think we used it very well."

According to Phillips, the name was changed to tweak what the title focused on. "We wanted to put more emphasis on Fenyx and his or her interaction with the gods and less so on the simpler opposition between gods and monsters," he says. "We wanted it to be more personalized, so we felt like that title, Immortals Fenyx Rising, better captured that element that we wanted to push forward with the game."

As for what the name could mean for the future, Phillips is open to the notion that it could very well be the beginning of a franchise, under one condition: This game has to do well first. "Coming from our pedigree on Assassin's Creed, we had the thought process of 'What is the universe?'" he says. "I think imagining visiting different mythologies in a way that is similar to Assassin's Creed could make a lot of sense. We'll see how Immortals Fenyx Rising does, and then we'll go from there."

AN UNLIKELY HERO

When my demo starts, Prometheus gives me the rundown on how Fenyx's journey began. After a violent storm destroys their ship, a unit of Greek soldiers returning from battle washes up on the shore of a mysterious island. Fenyx, a shield-bearer who had never seen combat, awakens alone. The soldiers, including Fenyx's legendary warrior brother, are missing. Fenyx must figure out what's going on, but first things first: I need to create my Fenyx.

Once I choose between a masculine or feminine body and voice, I pick skin tone, face, eye color, hair, facial hair, eyebrows, and even face paint. I choose a feminine voice and body, and give her some red warpaint across her eye reminiscent of Kratos from the God of War series. While I like my Fenyx the way I created her, I don't stress too much; I'm assured I can change her appearance, voice, or gender later.

With Fenyx's appearance set, it's time to explore the island. The only way off the beach is to climb the cliffside, so she jumps on the wall. Unlike Assassin's Creed, you don't need a visual ledge or grip to paint a path to climb along; similar to the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, you can climb any wall as long as your stamina doesn't run out before you reach the top or a place to rest.

After reaching the top, Fenyx notices that soldiers she traveled with, including her brother, Ligyron, have been turned to stone. While she's confused and scared, she realizes she needs to defend herself, so she borrows Ligyron's prized possession: the sword of the legendary Achilles.

When Zeus hears that Ligyron was gifted Achilles' sword, the god remarks that he "must have been good in … battle," before laying on some thick jealous vibes and lamenting that he never got a sword of his own from Achilles. This is no time for godly jealously, however, as two of Typhon's warriors from Tartaros appear and ready their blades.

Using the right bumper, I perform light combos and dispatch of the warriors with relative ease. The next batches aren't so easy, as I learn how to dodge, parry, and even perform heavy attacks and increase enemy stun gauges using the Axe of Atalanta. The combat plays out smoothly and controls well, but the true satisfaction comes from combining these abilities with other godly powers and weapons Fenyx gains along the way.

"We wanted something over the top, acrobatic, and where we can use the full repertoire of the gods, with the special and godly abilities," Galloudec says. "You can combine a lot of different attacks, moves, and abilities to create crazy combos based on your playstyle, your progression, and your abilities as a player, and something where you can feel really powerful and over the top."

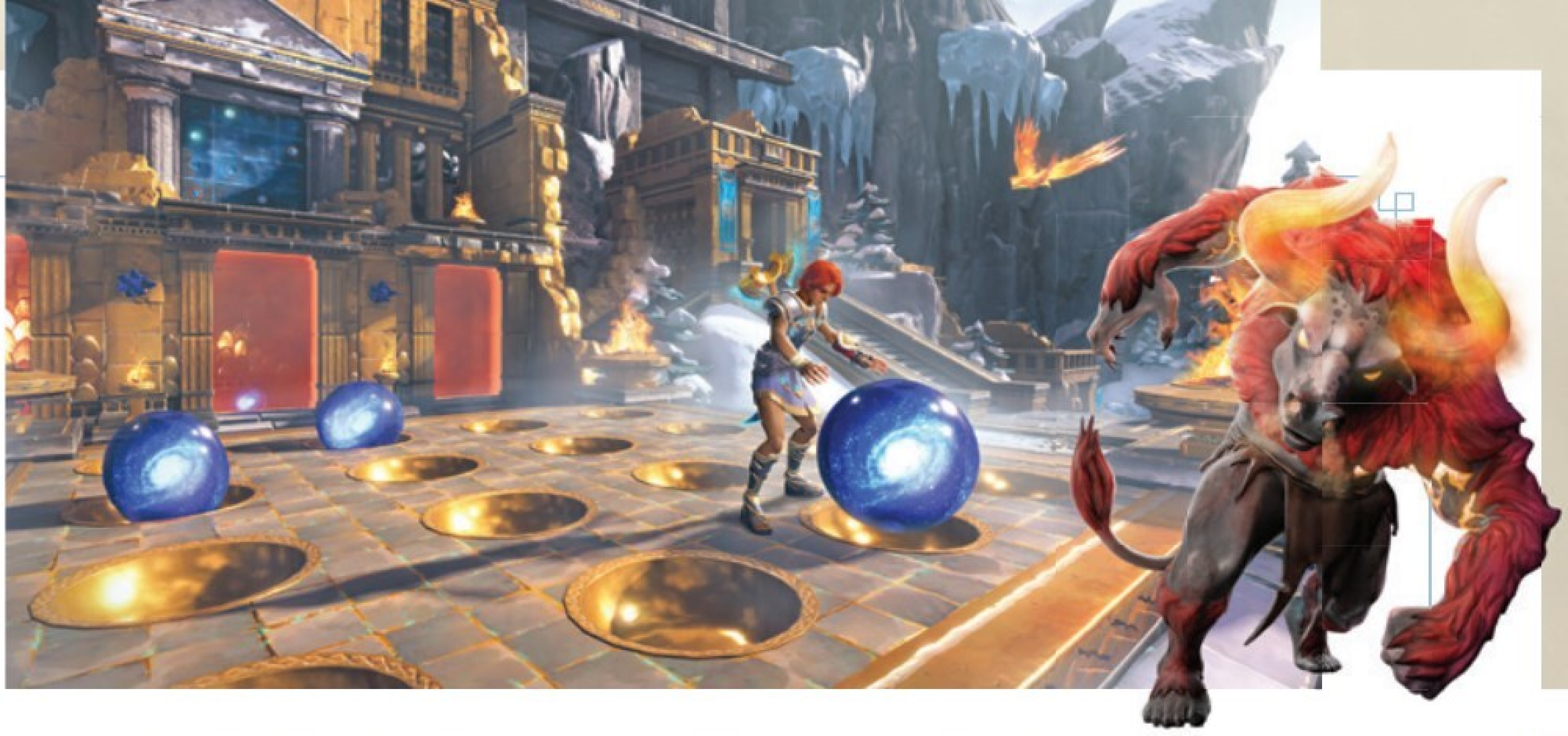
While the combat begins basic enough, relying on light and heavy attacks with parries and dodges mixed in, the game's progression opens up fast, enabling you to build the kind of warrior that suits your playstyle. Not only can you improve and augment Fenyx's existing moves, but you can learn new Godly Powers to weave into combat as well. Moves like Ares's Wrath, which launches enemies upward, or Hephaistos's Hammer, which knocks back and deals big damage to enemies in the area of the swing, can be added to Fenyx's arsenal for even more options during combat.

On top of that, you unlock gear that remains useful throughout your entire journey. Rather than going the trendy route of gear holding different power and rarity levels that are often made obsolete after finding better equipment, the gear you find in Immortals Fenyx Rising is meant to be swapped between regularly. "We wanted that loop where everything you find can be useful for you in a specific context," Galloudec says. "You're going to swap between different gear because of a boss, because of a challenge, because of a mountain you want to climb. Rather than just ditching a lot of pieces of gear because you get a new one every 10 minutes, we wanted that feeling that everything is important."

NEXT-GEN GODS

Immortals Fenyx Rising is set to launch on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia, and PC, but for those who want to experience the best version of Fenyx's journey, the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S versions deliver a few noteworthy enhancements. In addition to being able to run at 4K and 60 frames-per-second, less pop-in, and faster streaming of the visuals, the load screens are much shorter.

While this is good news for players, it presented a couple of challenges for the development team at Ubisoft Quebec. "We have a loading minigame when you're going into Vaults of Tartaros, and on some of the next-gen consoles and I think on Stadia, we ran into issues of the load being so fast that you couldn't even play this little minigame of collecting crystals," says game director Scott Phillips. "It's very fast, so loading-screen tips are not something we can really rely on anymore with these new consoles. That's going to be something we're going to have to design a way around."



> “WHEN WE STARTED THE GAME, ESPECIALLY FOR THE PUZZLES, WE LOOKED AT MANY GAMES AND OBVIOUSLY WE LOOKED AT BREATH OF THE WILD BECAUSE THE STRUCTURE WAS VERY CLOSE TO WHAT WE WANTED.”

TO THE DEPTHS OF TARTAROS

While the combat is a centerpiece to the action of Immortals Fenyx Rising, the puzzles of the game are another large component that cannot be ignored. As my gameplay demo progresses, Fenyx knows she needs to get the lay of the land before she can figure out where to go, so she fixates on a giant statue of Hermes, which she uses as a vantage point to scout her surroundings. Each region of the Golden Isle features an enormous statue of the god the region belongs to. Climbing to the top removes the clouds over that area on the map, giving you a better sense of direction.

After reaching the top, a griffin carrying a man flies by. Shocked by the sight of a creature she thought existed only in stories, Fenyx decides to help the poor guy. Using Fenyx’s Far Sight, which lets you mark locations of interest permanently, I pin a waypoint on a nearby red pit that’s labeled a “Vault of Tartaros.” I then scout the area, removing the fog from my map and revealing that I’m on Hermes’ Isle of Clashing Rocks.

As Fenyx approaches the Vault of Tartaros, she spots the aforementioned Axe of Atalanta. However, before she can grab it, it’s sucked into the glowing-red pit. I lead Fenyx after the axe, but as soon she jumps into it, the screen goes black and the voice of Zeus says, “Well, that’s the end of Fenyx,” and a fake credits scroll rolls, with Zeus and Prometheus listed for every role on the dev team before Prometheus corrects him that she didn’t die from entering the pit. It’s a humorous, over-the-top moment that perfectly encapsulates the goofiness that separates Immortals Fenyx Rising from Assassin’s Creed Odyssey.

“What we learned from Odyssey was that we really enjoyed making funny, lighthearted types of stories in games,” says lead cinematic designer Michelle Plourde. “We took what we learned from Odyssey and where that kind of shined through and we transferred that into Fenyx Rising, but instead of making that where you see instances of the story being funny at some points, we tried to make it so it’s a comedy instead of this type of serious game.”

The pit Fenyx enters is a Vault of Tartaros. Much like the Shrines in Breath of the Wild, Vaults are large, puzzle-based challenge rooms for the protagonist to conquer in order to claim power-boosting prizes. This first Vault is called “A Passage in the Abyss,” and as you might expect, keeps things pretty basic, but later Vaults involve pressure switches, physics puzzles, and tricky jumps – and I only got a glimpse of some easier ones.

“When we started the game, especially for the puzzles, we looked at many games and obviously we looked at Breath of the Wild because the structure was very close to what we wanted,” Galloudec says. “That was interesting for the structure and the way to build a level, but we also looked at the Portals, World of Goo, Angry Birds … we looked at many, many different games to see not necessarily the gameplay, but more how they use ingredients, how they use the level design and the flow to build that level where the player is going to quickly understand what they’re supposed to do while still having to think about the execution of the solution.”

Immortals Fenyx Rising features around 60 of these Vaults, with a diverse offering that includes puzzles, arenas, special bosses, and epic versions called God Vaults. God Vaults are related to the quest you’re on in the region to reunite the gods with their essences.

The process of including these Vaults as a central mechanic was met with some resistance within Ubisoft. “It was something we had to be very clear with when we were talking with [Ubisoft’s headquarters in] Paris about: We want to approach puzzles as one of our core pillars, and there was a bit of a, ‘Are you sure?’” Phillips recalls. “We didn’t necessarily have a lot of experience. We had some people that had done Prince of Persia, we had tiny little elements in Assassin’s Creed Odyssey, but it was really a whole new thing for us, so we spent a lot of time iterating and prototyping and trying a lot of different things. There’s 60 or so Vaults in the game, but we had over 100 prototypes, and we tried a lot of different variety of things. We iterated on them a ton to find what are the right mechanics and the right ways to challenge the players.”

In the first Vault, Fenyx tracks down the axe, claims a pair of broken wings that allows her to double jump, and solves a couple of short switch-based puzzles to reach the end. At the conclusion of the Vault, she gains access to a lightning bolt of Zeus. As you collect more of Zeus’s Lightning, you can upgrade Fenyx’s stamina. With her new ability to double jump, Fenyx can now cross a crumbling bridge that leads to a new area, and her adventure continues.

THE POWER OF PROGRESSION

Within the Hall of the Gods, you can trade resources and collectibles for various upgrades to Fenyx's abilities and weapons. Here is what each station in the Hall of the Gods does.

RIVER STYX CISTERN Trade Coins of Charon, which you acquire for completing various challenges, to upgrade Fenyx's Godly Powers and skills

HERMES'S HEROIC TASK BOARD Take on side tasks, ranging from hunting animals to looting treasures from Vaults of Tartaros, to earn rewards and resources

CAULDRON OF CIRCE Craft various potions from resources gathered in the world. You can also upgrade your apothecary skills to make more potent potions

FORGE OF HEPHAISTOS Use Adamantine Shards collected in battle to upgrade Fenyx's weapons, equipment, and carrying capacity of potions and arrows

KYLIX OF ATHENA Use Ambrosia collected from the Golden Isle to upgrade Fenyx's maximum health

APHRODITE'S BEAUTY CHAIR Redo any part of the character creator, including voice, body type, and skin tone

GODLY ENCOUNTERS

As Fenyx reaches the new area, the griffin she spotted carrying the man while she was atop the statue of Hermes appears over a plateau in the distance, an obvious next stop for Fenyx's adventure. On her way to the cliffside where the griffin hauled its prey, more warriors of Tartaros appear. Achilles' sword does nothing but bounce off the shields they haul, but her newfound axe spins the enemies around upon impact, giving her the opening she needs to take them out. I soon find out that warriors aren't the only living things corrupted by Tartaros; when I reach the plateau, I'm ambushed by a couple of irritated chickens and a massive bear. The resulting battle has me mashing the dodge button and downing tons of health-recovering pomegranates, but I ultimately best the bear.

Though much of my gameplay session was spent following the first few hours of the mainline story, it was difficult to not get distracted by other activities in the world. In addition to the Vaults you uncover, players can expect to take part in navigation challenges where you need to get from one point to another within a time limit, constellation challenges, where you solve huge puzzles that take up a whole area in the world, and even mythical world bosses.

The development team wanted to really hammer home the notion of giving players ample reason to explore. "We spent a lot of time making sure the world itself, everywhere you go, everywhere that feels like it should be rewarding for reaching it, is rewarding and has something for you," Phillips says.

I'm tempted to explore more of the world, but I resist and continue along the main path for the sake of seeing more of the story. That giant bear may be vanquished, but the action isn't over yet, as I'm confronted with a grotesque gorgon – not my day. The gorgon swallows something glimmering, and Fenyx is enamored by it; she needs to know what it is. Rather than facing the mythological creature head-on, Fenyx sneaks up on the beast, delivering a stealthy critical hit to give her the upper hand in the battle. After defeating it, the gorgon drops the treasure it devoured: the legendary Bracers of Herakles. Once again, Fenyx's ability suite expands, as she now possesses the strength to push, pick up, and throw giant objects, like stones and metal boxes.

The griffin is nowhere to be found, but the man runs out from behind a boulder, free of the creature's grasp. Fenyx continues her pursuit, saving the man from a group of baddies and entering another Vault to claim the Bow of Odysseus. The bow operates like a standard bow and arrow, with the ability to quickly fire lighter attacks, or really pull back on the bowstring and deliver heavy shots at range. However, this blessed bow can also fire Apollo's Arrow, special shots you guide to their target after you fire. Using Apollo's Arrow, I bend a shot around a gate to hit a target and solve the Vault to claim another one of Zeus's bolts.

Now, with a full godlike arsenal at her disposal, Fenyx beelines toward the Oracle, who hopefully has answers for how to reverse the curse that has stricken her fellow soldiers. At long last, she reaches the Temple of Apollo, but it's swarmed with warriors and a gorgon who are harassing none other than that stranger she's been tailing. She defeats them, and finally speaks with the man. He thanks her for saving him, but he pulls a sleight-of-hand trick and steals her bracers. Fenyx follows the man into the temple, where she finds the Oracle … or so she thinks. Unfortunately, the Oracle was turned to stone, so all that's left is a clueless temple priest. Fenyx recounts her terrible day before the priest's eyes begin

glowing. He levitates and reveals himself to be an Oracle after all, delivering a long, cryptic prophecy that hints at the adventure to come.

Fenyx is ready to head back out to tend to her mission, but before she can exit the temple, the man who robbed her comes out from the shadows to give her back the bracers; it turns out he wanted them as an offering to the Oracle. He tells her she needs to retrieve Aiolos's jar in yet another Vault of Tartaros. After solving various pressure-plate and physics-based puzzles, Zeus gets a little bored and tries to change the narrative of what's happening, injecting a giant cyclops into the Vault. Prometheus tries to gain back control of the story, but Zeus overpowers him, resulting in a boss battle.

This unreliable narrator convention pops up from time to time to keep the players on their toes both narratively and from a gameplay perspective. "We thought it added flair!" Plourde says. "We have these feuding family members, so why not make use of them and have what they're saying come to life on screen since they are telling a story? Why not make use of it as a kind of gameplay/narrative tool? It's a tool to have them bicker and be different. Obviously, Zeus can take over control of the story because he's present with Prometheus, so why not?"

With Zeus getting his way this time, the cyclops swings his giant arms as I dodge and parry, but the attack Fenyx really needs to worry about is his ground-pound, an AoE attack that is unable to be parried. While using her sword, axe, and bow to chip away at his health, the most effective method is to hurl stone blocks at him to fill his stun meter. Once staggered, Fenyx can unload on him, dealing serious damage. After grabbing the lightning bolt from the Vault, Fenyx returns to Earth with the jar, ready to solve one last puzzle before finally claiming the piece that will make her broken wings whole.

On her way to the observatory where the part is held, she encounters harpies, mythological birdlike creatures. These beasts hover over the ground, meaning your bow is your best weapon. However, they blast beams toward you and if you time your parry correctly, you can volley them back their way to inflict a good chunk of damage. The real trick is to lure them close to you so you can bash and slash them with your melee weapons. After defeating all the harpies, Fenyx solves one last puzzle, claims the missing piece to her wings, and meets up with the mysterious man one more time.

As soon as Fenyx reaches the top of the observatory, Typhon appears, larger than ever. The man yells that he'll take him down, just like before, but Typhon seems unphased by the threats. As he creeps closer, the man tells Fenyx to open Aiolos's jar. Fenyx listens, unleashing an impossibly strong gust of wind at the monster, blowing him off into the distance. The duo is safe for now, but this maneuver likely did little more than buy them time.

The man finally reveals himself to be Hermes, the winged herald and most clever of the Olympian gods. He tells Fenyx they need a plan, and to use her new wings to fly to the mainland of the Golden Isle to meet him at the Hall of the Gods. I jump, and with a press of a button, I'm flying toward the newly accessible area. The flight experience is more of a controlled glide; she can press forward or hover, but regardless of the action, as long as she's suspended in mid-air, it takes stamina. Thankfully, if you run out of stamina while in flight, you don't need to worry about a painful fall to the ground below; instead, you slowly drift downward for a soft landing. With the stamina bar Fenyx has at the start of the journey, I barely make it to the new area, Aphrodite's Valley of Eternal Spring. As my demo reaches its home stretch, things are about to ratchet up.

THE GODLY GIFTS OF FENYX

Fenyx is on a daunting task to take on mythological beasts and corrupted warriors from the underworld. However, they're not alone. In addition to the various gods of Olympos they encounter, they also have the blessings of various iconic figures from Greek mythology through the use of their gear and weapons. Here are the various weapons and accessories Fenyx has access to from the early moments of the adventure.

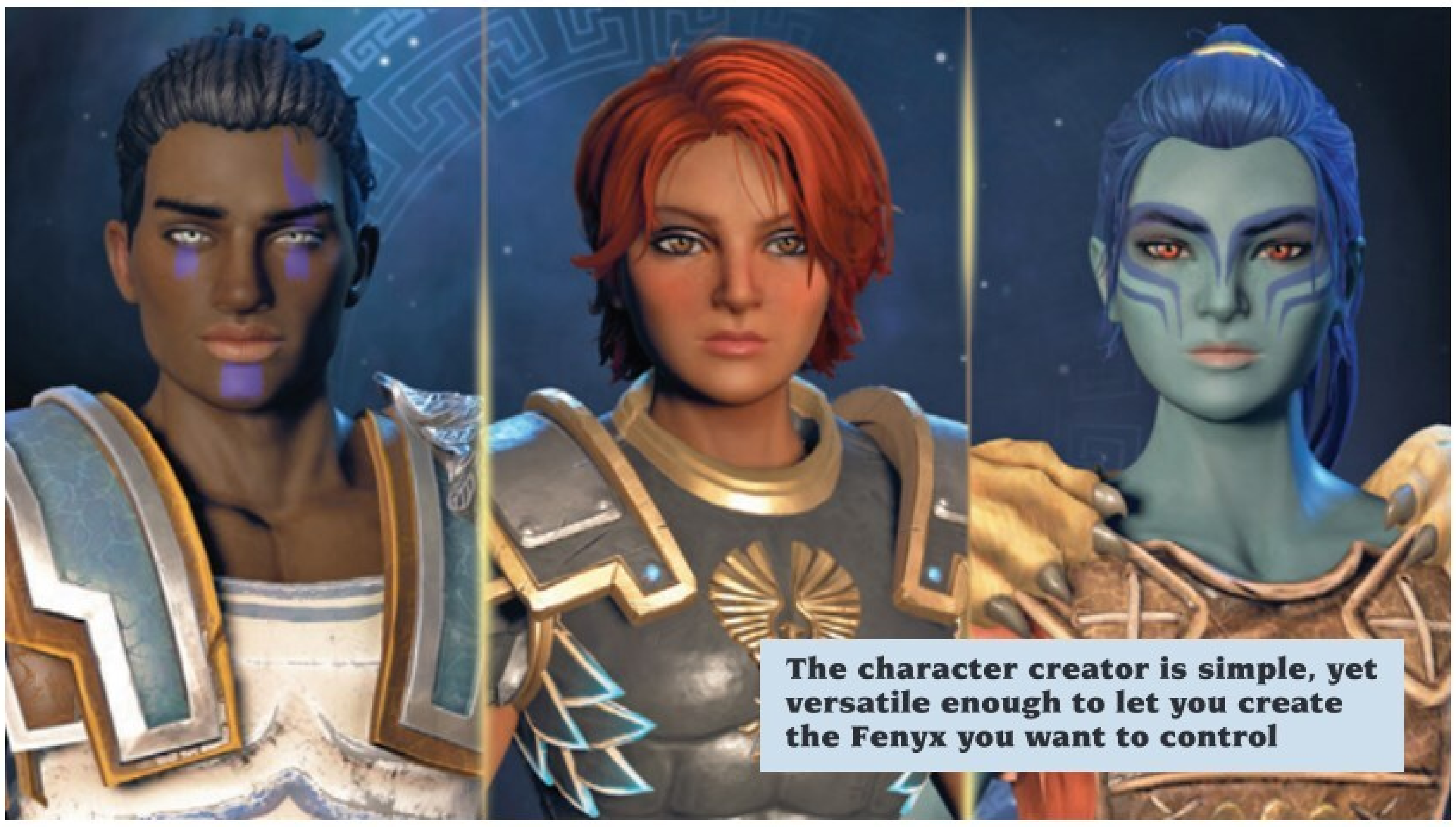
SWORD OF ACHILLES A sword Fenyx uses to deliver quick, light attacks

AXE OF ATALANTA An axe used to not only deliver slow, heavy attacks, but also boost the stun meter of Fenyx's target

BOW OF ODYSSEUS A bow that can be used for both quick and charged shots. Fenyx can also take direct control of the arrow after it leaves the bowstring using the power of Apollo's Arrow

WINGS OF DAIDALOS Wings mounted on Fenyx's back allowing him or her to double jump and glide across great distances

BRACERS OF HERAKLES Shimmering bracers that give Fenyx the strength to push, lift, and throw heavy objects like stones, logs, and boxes



The character creator is simple, yet versatile enough to let you create the Fenyx you want to control

BEAUTY AND PAIN

Fenyx lands in the Valley of Eternal Spring, but before she can do anything, she needs to meet Hermes in the Hall of the Gods. This meeting place of the gods of Olympos is normally full of life and excitement, but today, it's conspicuously empty. "Where are the others?" she asks Hermes. Now that they finally have time, Hermes gets Fenyx up to speed on Typhon and his quest to destroy the gods of Olympos. Hermes reveals to Fenyx that she is the only person able to stop Typhon in his quest to plunge the world into chaos.

In the Hall of the Gods, Fenyx can trade collectibles and resources for various upgrades. You can add new abilities, change your appearance and voice, take on tasks from Hermes to earn various rewards, and more. I optimize Fenyx to be just the way I want her, adding a sword combo that finishes with a power strike, increased stamina, a more powerful axe, and a new ponytail to boot. I then take flight to the nearest statue: a monument to Aphrodite.

Amidst my climb, I find what appears to be a fairy trapped in a cage. I free it to learn that it's a piece of Nike, the goddess of victory. If you free all of the fairy-like fragments of the goddess, Nike can return to her full glory. Zeus takes a moment to make a shoe joke before I continue my ascent. While the setting of Immortals is undeniably ancient, players should expect modern references like the Nike one, or a turbulence joke Hermes makes before Fenyx's first flight, thrown in every so often.

"The line was almost only drawn where a joke would age badly, as in people 30 years from now wouldn't get the joke," Yohalem says. "The turbulence joke, anyone who knows what an airplane is would understand that joke. That was the line: to create timeless, modern humor."

Upon reaching the top, I scout the region and Prometheus runs me through the points of interest in the Valley of Eternal Spring. While Eros's and Aphrodite's Palaces sound promising, a beautiful apple tree catches Fenyx's eye. I mark the apple tree on my map and fly toward it.

Upon arrival, Fenyx learns that the apple tree is actually Aphrodite, stripped of her essence. Typhon's assault on the gods has left the goddess of love and beauty in a sorry state, distraught she's unable to help the animals in her valley. Fenyx needs to figure out some way to free Aphrodite from her timber trap. Suddenly, Fenyx recalls the Oracle's prophecy mentioning "a pearl in rough seas." With that hint alone, the two realize they could recreate the conditions of Aphrodite's birth by rolling a giant pearl into the sea and gathering the salty foam. Fenyx has her next mission.

The mission results in fighting through hordes of enemies while slowly pushing a giant pearl into the sea before gathering the Godly Seafoam to return to Aphrodite in hopes of killing the roots that bind her to her tree form. The seafoam doesn't reconnect Aphrodite with her essence, but it does get the attention of Typhon. The vengeful titan sends a shadowy wraith of Achilles down to Fenyx's location, resulting in a battle against a dark reflection of the legendary hero.

Equipped with a multitude of weapons like a sword and spear, the Wraith of Achilles is a formidable opponent – it also doesn't help that Typhon is raining down explosive rocks from the sky during the battle. However, using Fenyx's abilities to dodge and parry the incoming attacks (as well as plenty of health-recovery items), the legendary warrior retreats to fight another day, and Typhon's assault on the area ceases.

“THEY HAVE THIS HUGE BACKSTORY AND SOME OF THEM LOVE EACH OTHER AND SOME OF THEM HATE EACH OTHER.”

When I return to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty tells Fenyx that the wraith returned to a nearby Wraith Lair. Until I clear out that lair and finally defeat the fallen hero, his wraith will continue to appear across the island. While Achilles' lair is now accessible, Fenyx must continue her adventure before she can uncover the Wraith Lairs of Herakles, Atalanta, and Odysseus.

Once you do return the various gods to their normal forms, the Hall of the Gods becomes a much more bustling place where you can learn all kinds of backstory surrounding the Olympians. “The Hall of the Gods becomes kind of like a beach house in a reality show,” Phillips says. “As you free the gods, you're adding voices to that cacophony and they're all interacting with each other. They have this huge backstory and some of them love each other and some of them hate each other.”

To save Aphrodite and return her to her normal form, I'll need to retrieve the tears she shed when Adonis died. However, that's a quest for another time. I have bigger fish (or in this case, birds) to fry.

BIRDS, STONES, ETC.

Before my time with Immortals Fenyx Rising ends, I encounter one of the world bosses. Each enemy type across the world has more powerful, legendary versions with unique abilities and moves, but there are four world bosses that live up to their name, providing the biggest and most challenging showdowns.

“There's only four of them in the entire world and they each have an area dedicated to them that's really custom-built for their battle to make them a really epic fight,” Phillips says. “They're some of the biggest enemies we have in the game.”

For the world boss I get to see, Fenyx must travel to a remote island off the coast of the Valley of Eternal Spring. After a long flight that requires several stamina-replenishment items to remain airborne long enough, Fenyx climbs up a rocky cliffside and encounters Ozomene, the mythical Harpy Queen. The massive, winged beast can do all the moves of a typical harpy, but this is far from just a stronger common enemy. This monster can smash into the ground, sending out a shockwave, or fly overhead, raining down molten rocks. The best way to combat Ozomene is to parry the beams and unload heavy attacks until you stagger it.

Once you inflict enough damage, the Harpy Queen retreats to a higher arena for the final stage of the fight. Once there, the creature is even more aggressive and ferocious with its attacks, but when you get its pattern down, you can continue to chip away at its health until you stagger it. After dealing tons of damage over the course of the lengthy battle, Fenyx delivers the final blow and the Harpy Queen disintegrates.

Defeating these world bosses give you a wealth of shards to use for Fenyx's upgrades, but they can also net you unique cosmetic gear. Defeating Ozomene grants Fenyx Wings of the Hideous, a cosmetic item that replaces your Wings of Daedalos, turning the angelic white wings into scaly wings reminiscent of the Harpy Queen's. Sadly, I don't have much time to see the exotic new wings in action, as my time with the game comes to an end.

WEAVING AN EPIC TALE

After my extended hands-on time with Immortals Fenyx Rising, I can't wait to dig into the final product. The gameplay loop doles out continuous rewards, enticing you to continue playing, and the Vaults of Tartaros are exciting to explore and solve.

A new IP is always a risk, especially one that's ambitious and crafts an open-world combining many different gameplay elements, but if the entire game stacks up to what I played, Ubisoft could have another hit on its hands. For now, we can only wait to see if Immortals Fenyx Rising is not only worthy of standing next to the other Ubisoft franchises, but also worthy of being told alongside the established epics of Greek mythology. ◆

Head to GameInformer.com/Immortals to learn more about Immortals Fenyx Rising

SPLIT-SCREAM HORROR

The Medium shows a fractured view of reality, where players engage with nightmarish layered worlds

BY JEFF CORK

» PLATFORM
Xbox Series X/S • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Bloober Team

» DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

» RELEASE
January 28, 2021

If you aren't familiar with its recent work, the name "Bloober Team" may invoke more giggles than gasps. Name aside, the studio has built a reputation for delivering games aimed squarely at giving players a reason to flip the lights on. Over the past few years, the Polish developer has released Layers of Fear, Observer, and Blair Witch. Its latest project, The Medium, is one of the first games making its console debut on Xbox Series X/S – a move the team has said was necessary thanks to its hardware-pushing take on dual realities. We talked to members of Bloober Team to get a sense of what players can expect from the title and to learn more about how they're hoping to freak people out in January.

The titular medium is a woman named Marianne, an outcast of sorts who has a deep connection with the spirit world. It's something she's learned to deal with over her life, even using her innate gifts in her work in a mortuary office. There, she acts as a bit of a guide, helping ghosts reconcile painful memories here in our world so that they can pass along to whatever comes next. She's been haunted, too, tormented with images of a child murder.

One day, a stranger contacts her, saying that he knows something about the case, and that he wants to meet her in an abandoned communist hotel/vacation resort in the forest outside Krakow. It's a little outside her comfort zone, but she feels compelled to follow the trail. "She's not this undercover detective or a vigilante," says producer Jacek Zięba. "She has a vision, and she doesn't know what she needs to do with it. She starts to use her powers in the mortuary; 'Okay, the living don't want me, so… 'But there's still this mystery about this dream. One vision, one dream that hounds her."

Simply walking into the lobby would be too easy; this is a video game, after all. And since it's a horror game, she has to navigate through some creepy spaces on her way to meet this stranger. I get a quick glimpse of the journey as Marianne approaches a low-slung fort. It almost looks as though it's a part of the forest itself, its stony façade melting into the landscape. She walks in, and the path immediately narrows. There's been some kind of cave-in or collapse, and she shuffles along sideways to proceed. "Something happened here," she says aloud to nobody in particular, and I tend to agree.

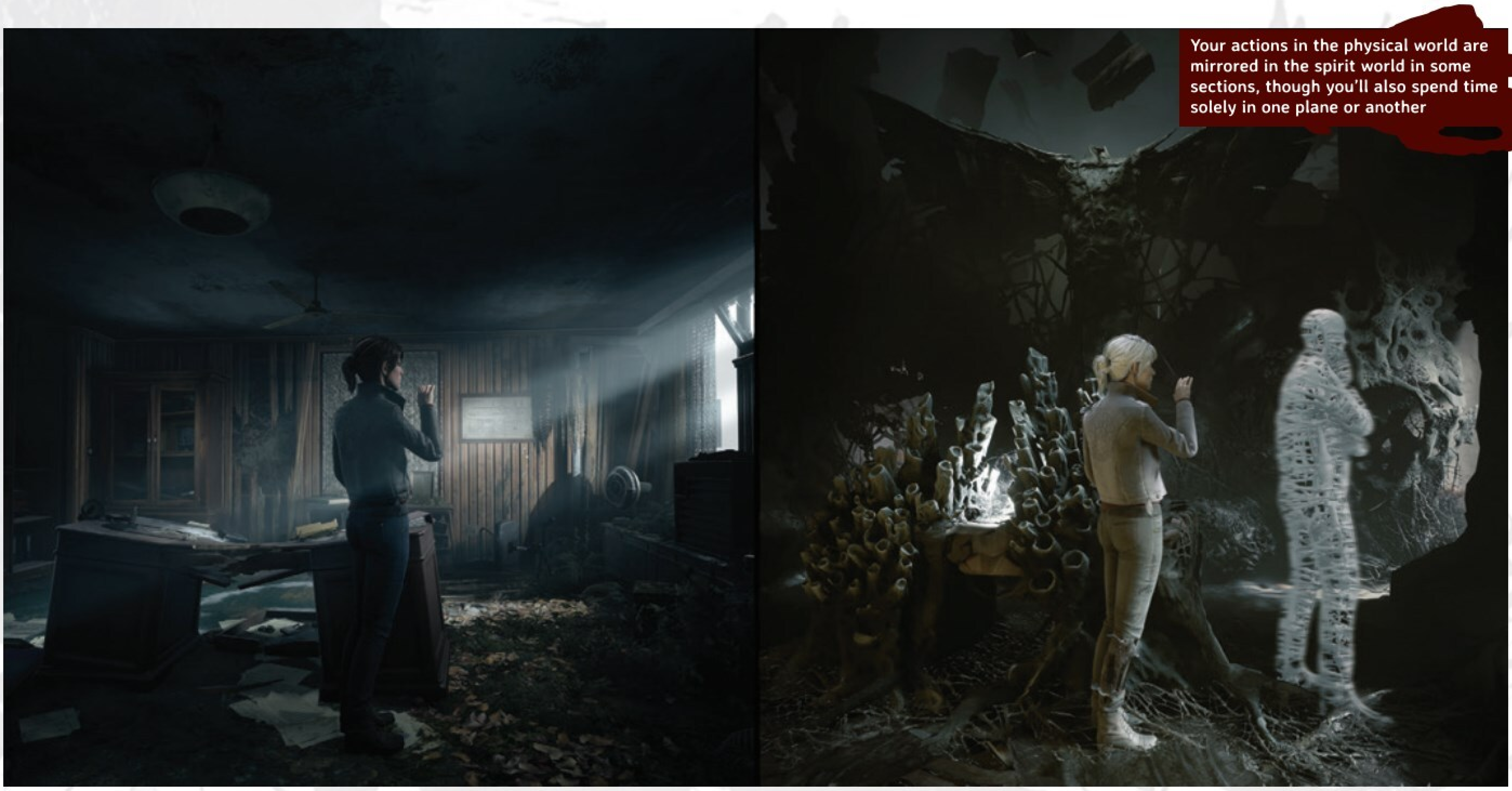
Marianne's connection with the spirit world allows her to help trapped souls – clearing paths for her in our world, too

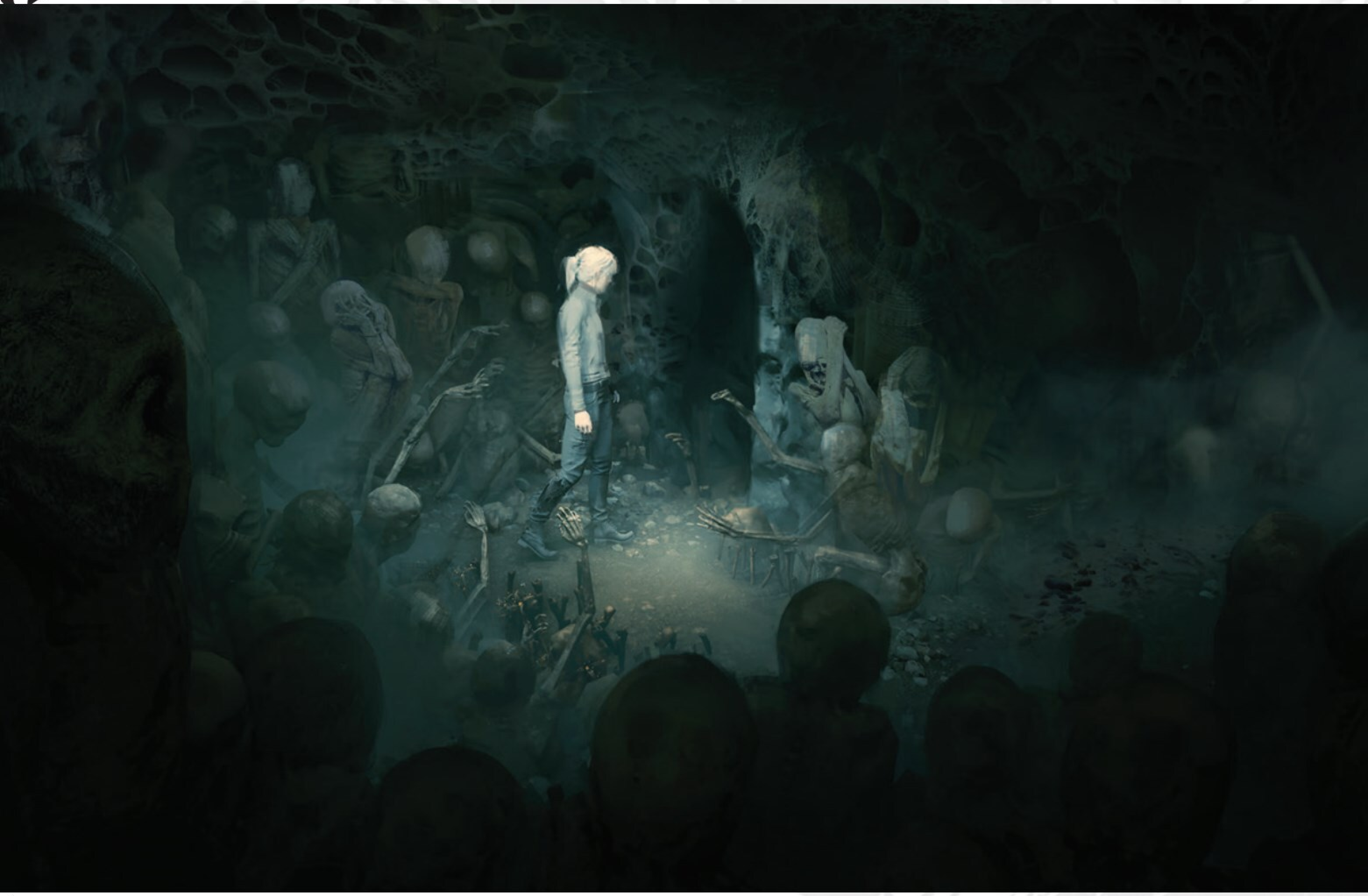
When she emerges on the other side, there's a jarring flashing effect, and she holds her head in pain. Marianne's gifts don't come easy; even though she has become accustomed to them, connecting with the spirit world takes a physical toll in the form of splitting headaches. That's not the only thing that's splitting, I quickly realize.

The screen is bisected vertically, showing the familiar physical world on the left-hand side and a nightmarish alternate view on the other. Marianne appears in both worlds simultaneously, though her avatar's hair is pure white in the spiritual plane. As Marianne continues along in the physical world, her actions keep pace on the other side of the screen. The same overall geometry is there, though the details are memorably different. Most notably, the walls on the right side appear to be made of skin, with bones jutting out here and there. In comparison, the darkened tunnel on the other side – which alone would be creepy in most horror games – is almost a respite.

"Our game is not constantly in the two worlds at the same time," says lead game designer Wojciech Piejko. "I like to think of it like a Silent Hill 2 approach; sometimes you're in the normal world, sometimes in the spirit world, and sometimes you have two worlds displayed at the same time, like here."

Marianne's path ahead is blocked by a locked gate in reality, and a hazy blur in the spiritual world. She walks over to a nearby power-junction box. It isn't getting any juice, which should come as a surprise to absolutely no one. I shift my eyes to the spirit-world side and see a fleshy mass that occupies the same general spot. It's not a power box, but a throbbing light indicates that it may be connected to the current predicament.


Your actions in the physical world are mirrored in the spirit world in some sections, though you'll also spend time solely in one plane or another



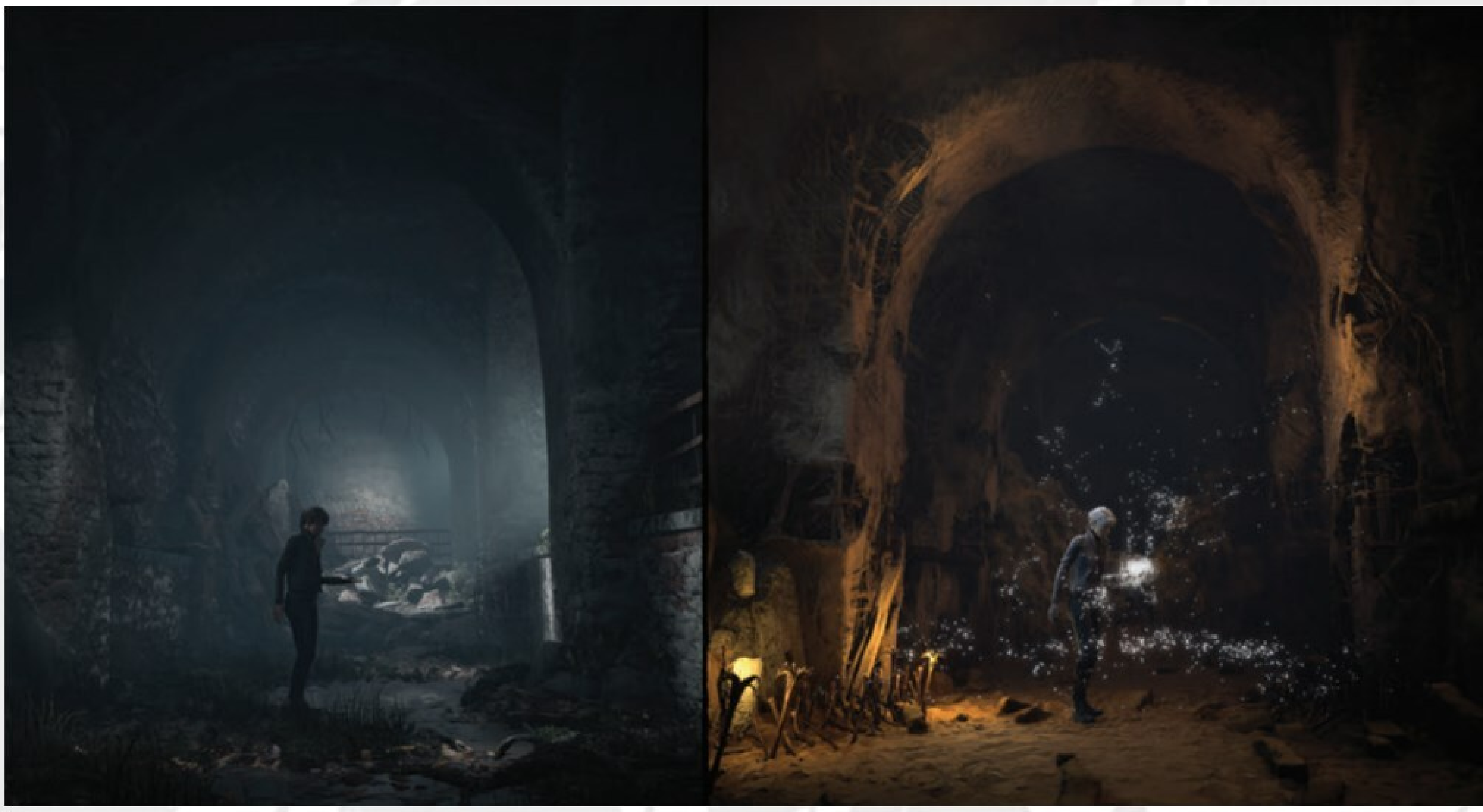
She taps into an alternate vision mode and sees not only the wiring connecting the boxes to the gate, but also some glowing footprints that lead down another passageway. Dutifully, she follows them. "The place felt old and soaked in misery," she notes along the way. "Figures, I guess. A thousand years of history doesn't just happen. It's paid for. In blood and spirit, but even in the deepest darkness, light can linger. Lonely, fragile, waiting for someone to embrace it."

At the end of the tunnel, Marianne spies a strange-looking shrine, called a Spirit Well. Or, at least it exists on the spirit side. It's just a concrete slab in the physical world. The shrine is watched over by several dozen stone-still figures, rigid, faceless, and rendered in the unmistakable style of Zdzisław Beksiński, a Polish painter who provided visual inspiration for the game.

Marianne's spirit avatar absorbs the energy from the well, and her left arm is covered in glowing patterns. It's a sneaky way to give players a visual indicator of how much spirit energy she has without resorting to an onscreen mana bar. Back at the power box, she charges and releases a spirit blast, which powers on the door. Walking through it generates the same strobing effect and loud sounds, though once it clears the screen resumes to a single view of the physical world. At least, for now.

The split-screen concept seems like it's ripe for some unnerving tricks, and Bloober Team readily agrees. "Did you see *The Haunting of Hill House*?" asks Zięba. "When you saw the whole series and then you watch on YouTube, 'Okay, most of the people in the background were ghosts,' and you don't even know it. That's something we can do also."

The Medium appears to be going for more atmospheric, psychological horror rather than trying to shock players with gore or a tiresome series of jump scares. "I think we learned that lesson with our first game, Layers of Fear," Piejko says. "It was really scary at the beginning, but then we put too much into jump scares and stuff like that that were just getting boring. We've learned how to better steer the emotional curve in the game. You have buildups; sometimes you have to stop being too scary, sometimes your character needs to joke to release the tension to build it again."



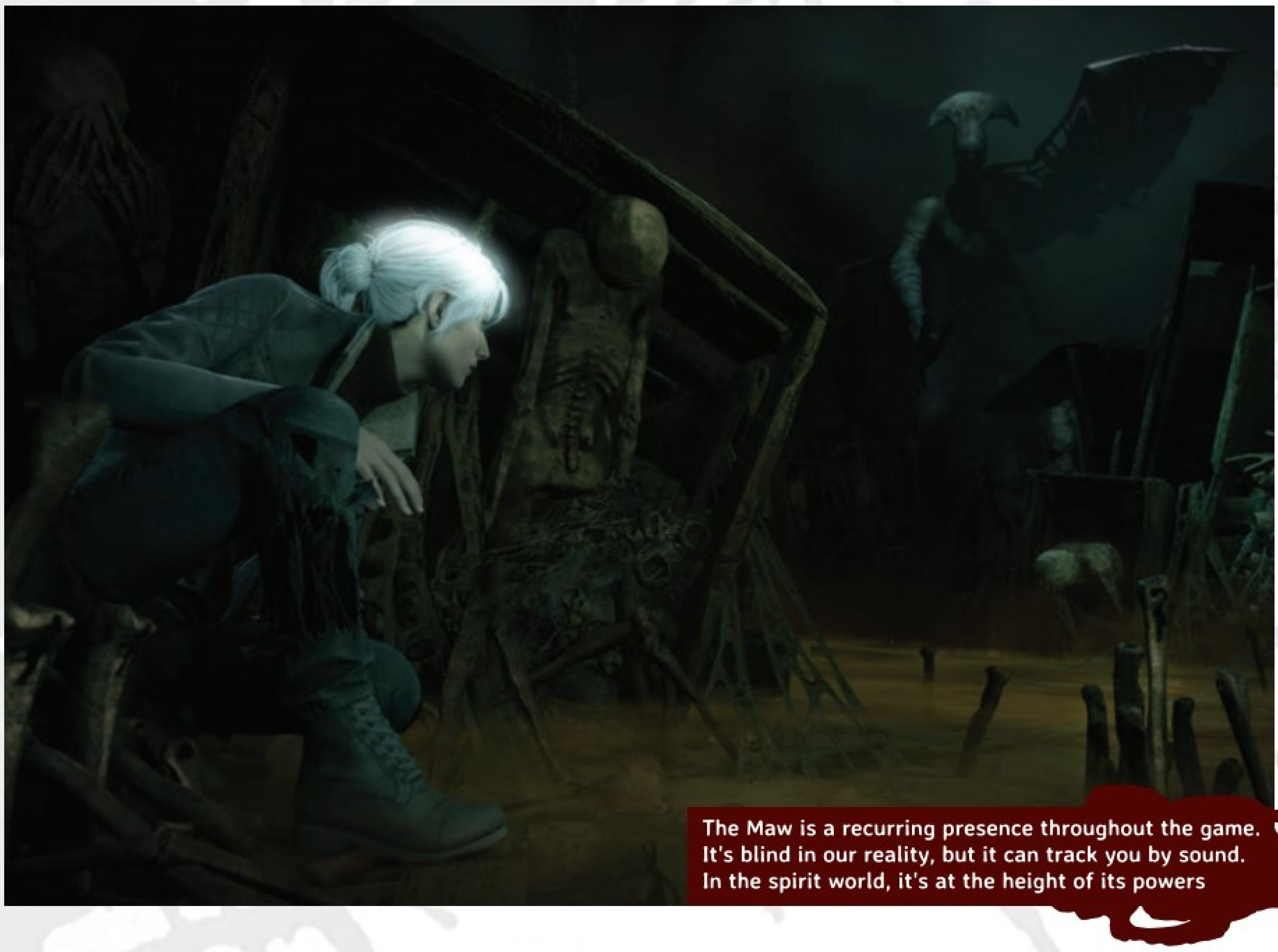
MEET THE MAW

My next look at The Medium jumps me further ahead, showing off some gameplay solely focused on the spirit world. This time, the full screen is devoted to the nightmarish visuals. It's also my introduction to a lurking presence known as the Maw.

Before that, however, Marianne helps the tormented soul of a boy named Bernard. He's a pathetic sight; a pale body tangled in a web of wires. After interacting with him, Marianne realizes that he's missing something. She's able to explore the tunnel labyrinth and find his death mask, but only after using spirit energy to dispel a wall of moths and a few rooms filled with the fluttering pests.

That moment of peace is quickly interrupted by the Maw's manifestation. It's a recurring enemy that Marianne will encounter throughout the game. I don't get a good look at his form, but I can tell that he's about nine feet tall and isn't up to any good. "Stay with me," he groans while plodding toward her. His voice, provided by Troy Baker, is guttural but almost pleading.

Marianne rushes away, but the Maw has other plans. Like Marianne, he can exist in both planes, though he's unable to see her when she's in the physical form. He does appear to have some kind of command over reality or Marianne's perception. In a stunning sequence, the two places flash back and forth between reality and the spirit world as she makes her escape. Dark skies are replaced with apocalyptic red and back again, as she crosses a bridge and makes her way into the forest. I catch a glimpse of a towering figure high in the distance, but don't get enough time to fully comprehend what I'm looking at. And with that, the demo ends.



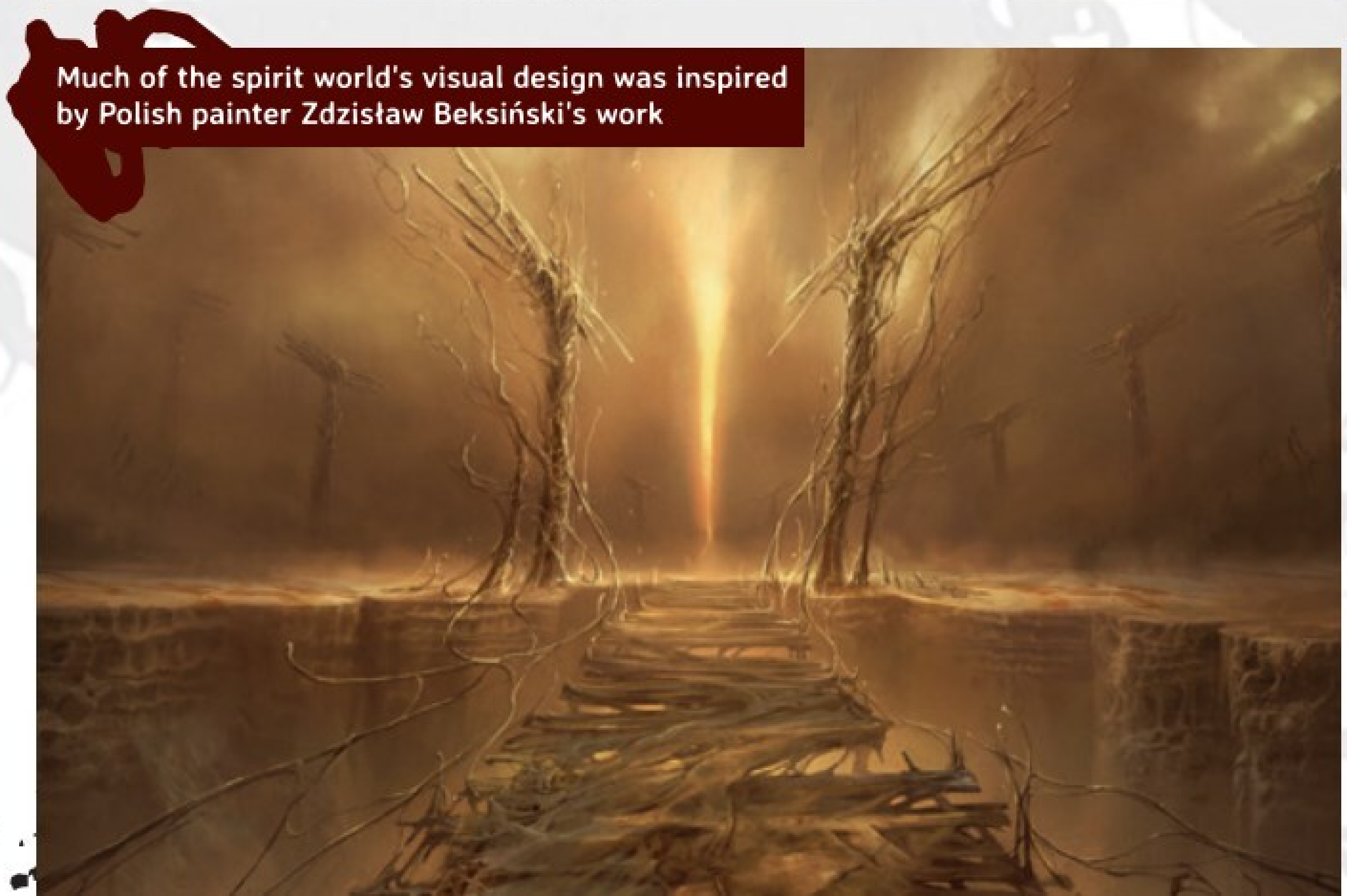
The Maw is a recurring presence throughout the game. It's blind in our reality, but it can track you by sound. In the spirit world, it's at the height of its powers

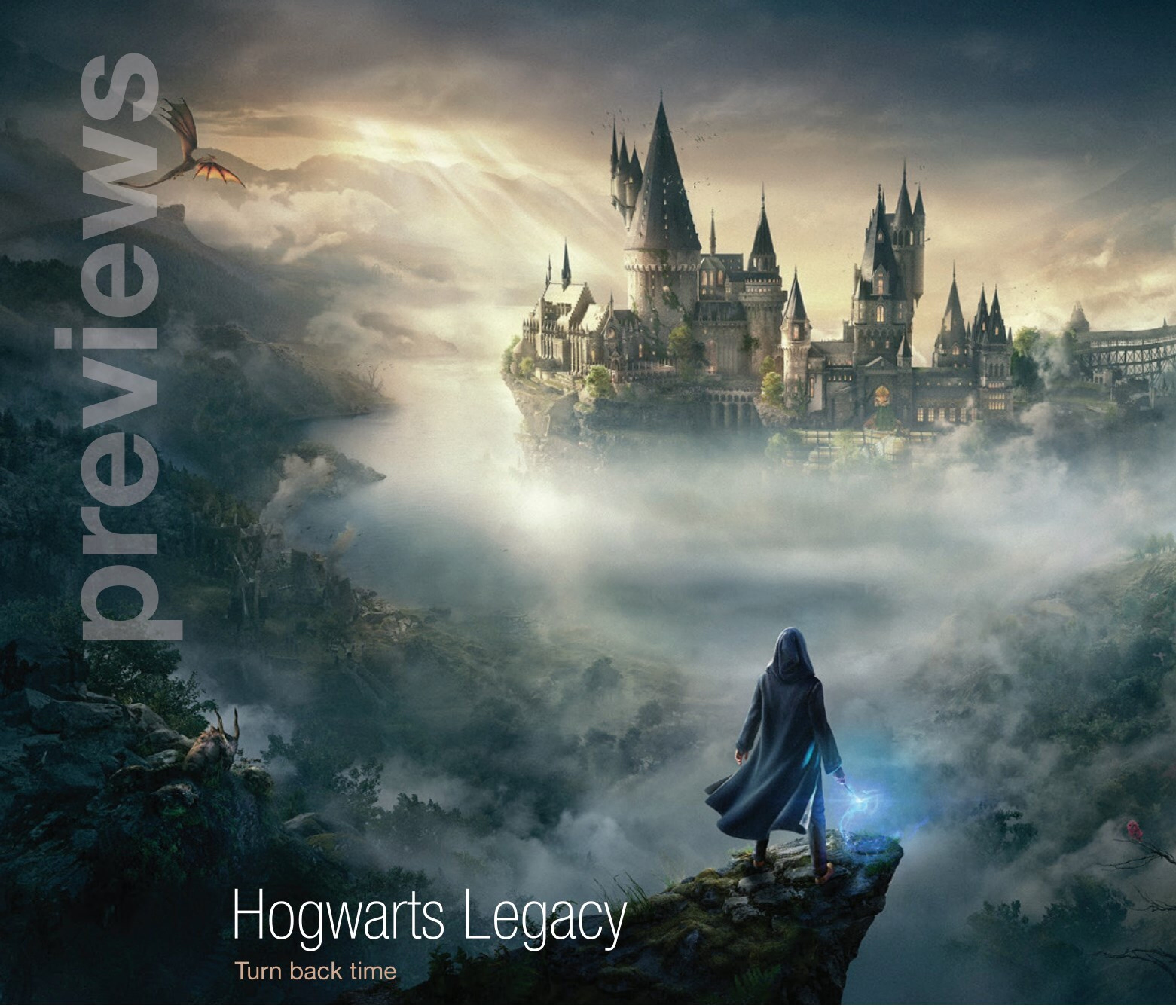
It's easy to see the Maw as your enemy, probably because he can and will kill you. But it's a little more complicated than that, Bloober Team says. "The whole game is based on dualities or different perspectives," Zięba says. "When you ask me if he's the main antagonist, I don't know – you need to play the game and then have your opinion about it."

It's a sentiment that Piejko echoes. "We are storytellers here at Bloober," he says. "We believe that horror is a very good vessel to tell the story about human emotions and about ourselves. It's mostly overlooked when people are thinking about horror. 'Oh, monsters and blood.' Yeah, but there's something behind that. With Medium, we're tackling the topic of different perspectives and how we perceive other people. I know it might sound a little artsy-fartsy, but we're hoping that people after playing it will think twice before judging something or someone. Maybe people will think he or she's done this, but 'why' is the question."

That's something players will be able to answer for themselves on January 28, when The Medium arrives on Xbox Series X/S and PC. ◆

Much of the spirit world's visual design was inspired by Polish painter Zdzisław Beksiński's work





Hogwarts Legacy

Turn back time

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Portkey Games,
Warner Bros. Games

» Developer
Avalanche Software

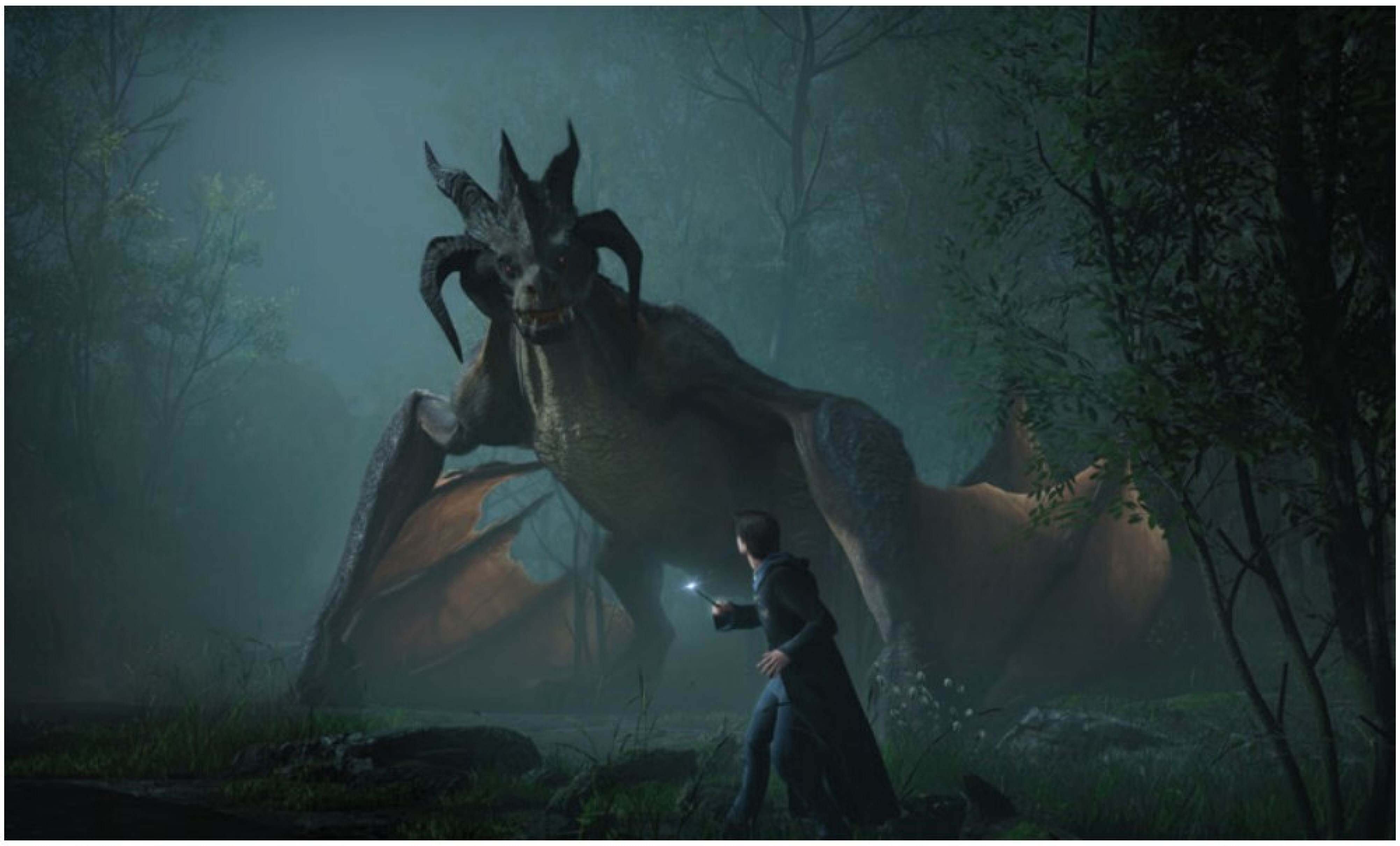
» Release
2021

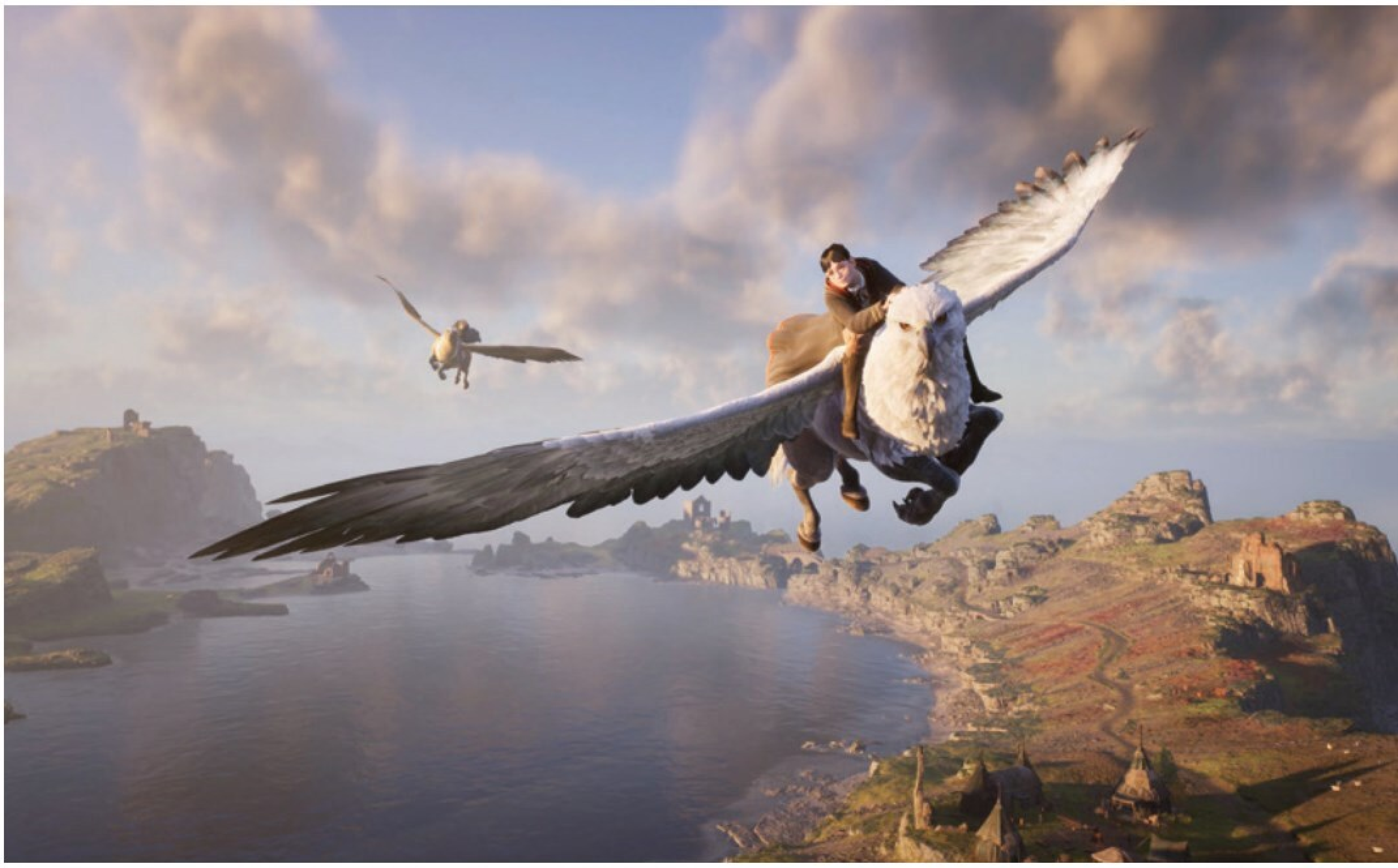
Even as the universe of J.K. Rowling's Wizarding World has continued to expand in other mediums, it's fair to say that none of the Harry Potter-themed video games that have come to market have fully tapped the potential of the franchise. Warner Bros. Games is hoping to change that through the establishment of Portkey Games, a dedicated publishing label with the express purpose of creating new gaming projects that further explore the fiction. With Avalanche Software tackling development duties, Hogwarts Legacy is the first project in the pipeline.

Rather than retread the familiar ground established in the *Harry Potter* novels, or the 1920s setting of the *Fantastic Beasts* films, Hogwarts Legacy jumps even further back to explore Hogwarts in the late 1800s. Players take on the role of their own created witch or wizard as they attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Avalanche hasn't revealed the scope of customization available to playable characters, but early glimpses suggest a variety of options in the cosmetics department. More importantly, each player will get to select their house at the start of the game; it should be fun to see whether Slytherin and Gryffindor were as competitive in those earlier days as they appeared in the novels set decades later. Beyond that, we know that the hero that players embody will stand apart from many of their Hogwarts peers, as they have the ability to master some form of ancient magic.

Hogwarts Legacy is built as an open-world action/RPG, with the castle and its nearby environs a big part of the explorable area, including familiar locales like the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade. Whether exploring the castle or outside of it, gameplay focuses on your magic-wielder's gradual growth into their new abilities, spells, and combat powers, as well as the brewing of potions, the taming of magical beasts, and the selection of friends and companions who join in on the adventure. Avalanche has also teased that players will run into various decision points that help "determine what they stand for," so it seems apparent that we'll discover at least some built-in system for shaping personality and morality.

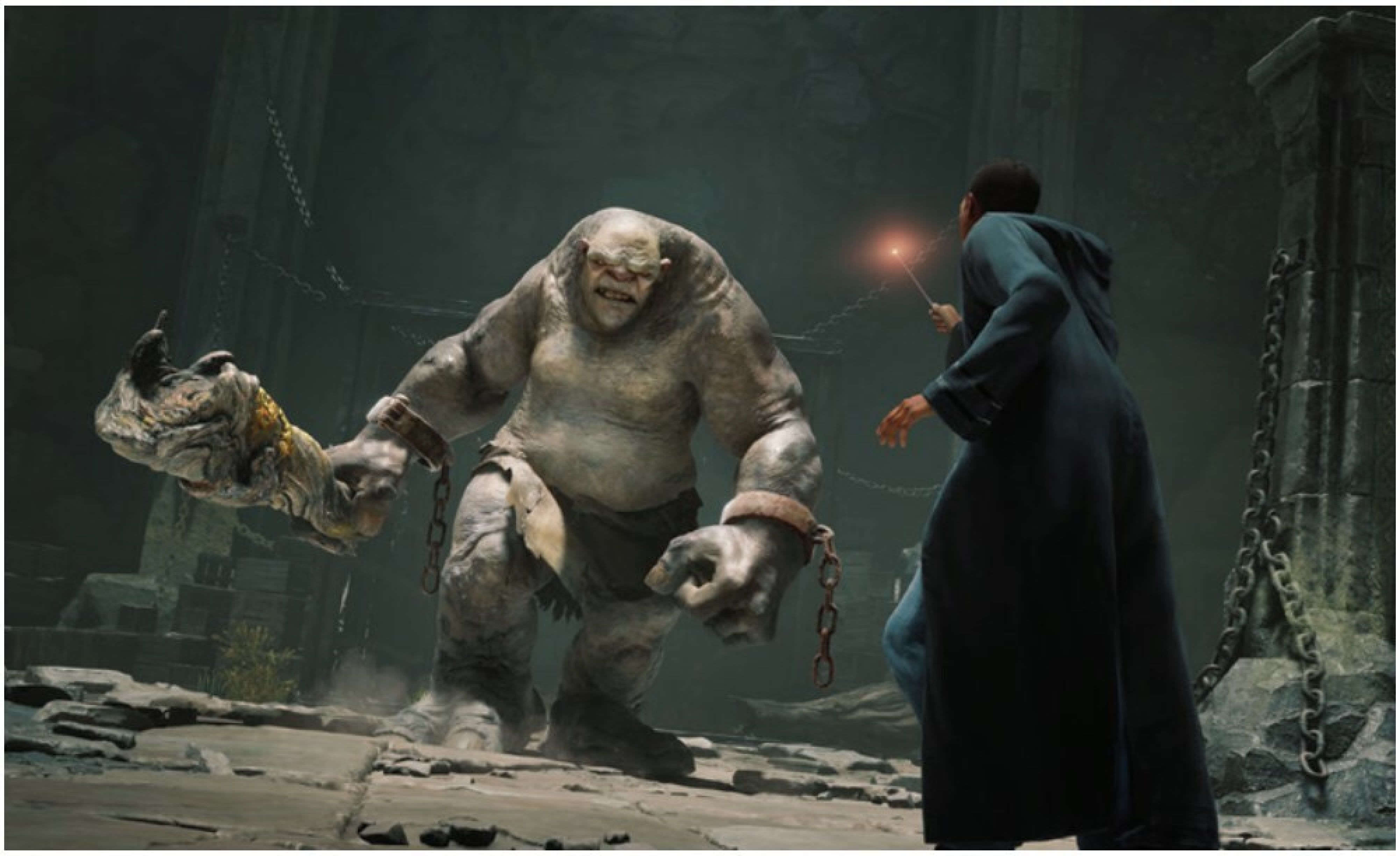
Rowling is not directly involved in the creation or writing of the game, but Portkey and Avalanche are both committed to rooting the game in established lore. Given the time period, that definitively means we won't see Harry, Ron, and Hermione running around, but a number of other series staples





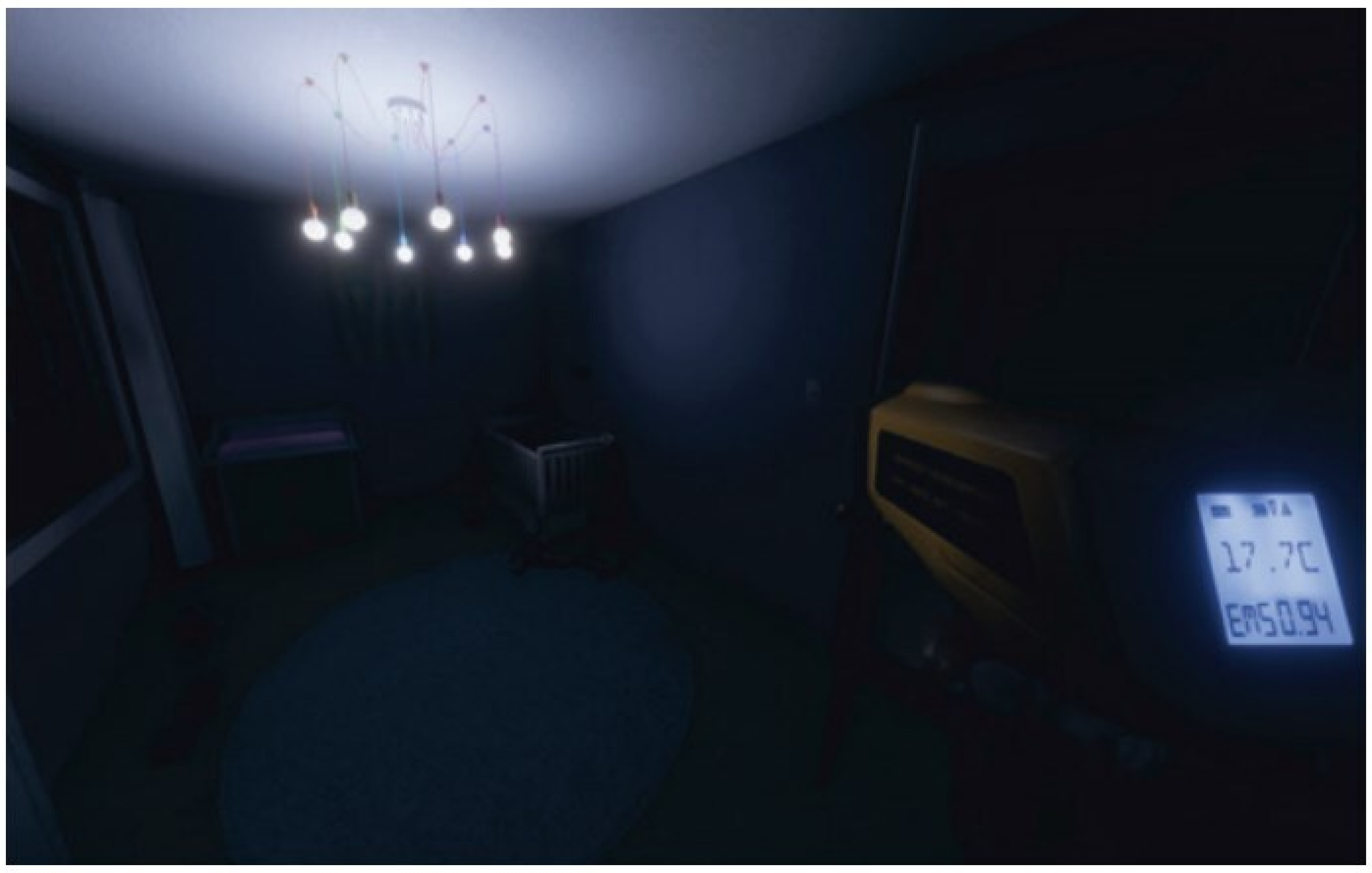
are present in early screenshots of the game. Dragons, trolls, and Dementors are just some of the creatures that are in evidence, and the presence of brooms (along with flying creatures) strongly suggests that flight will be available as part of the navigation options.

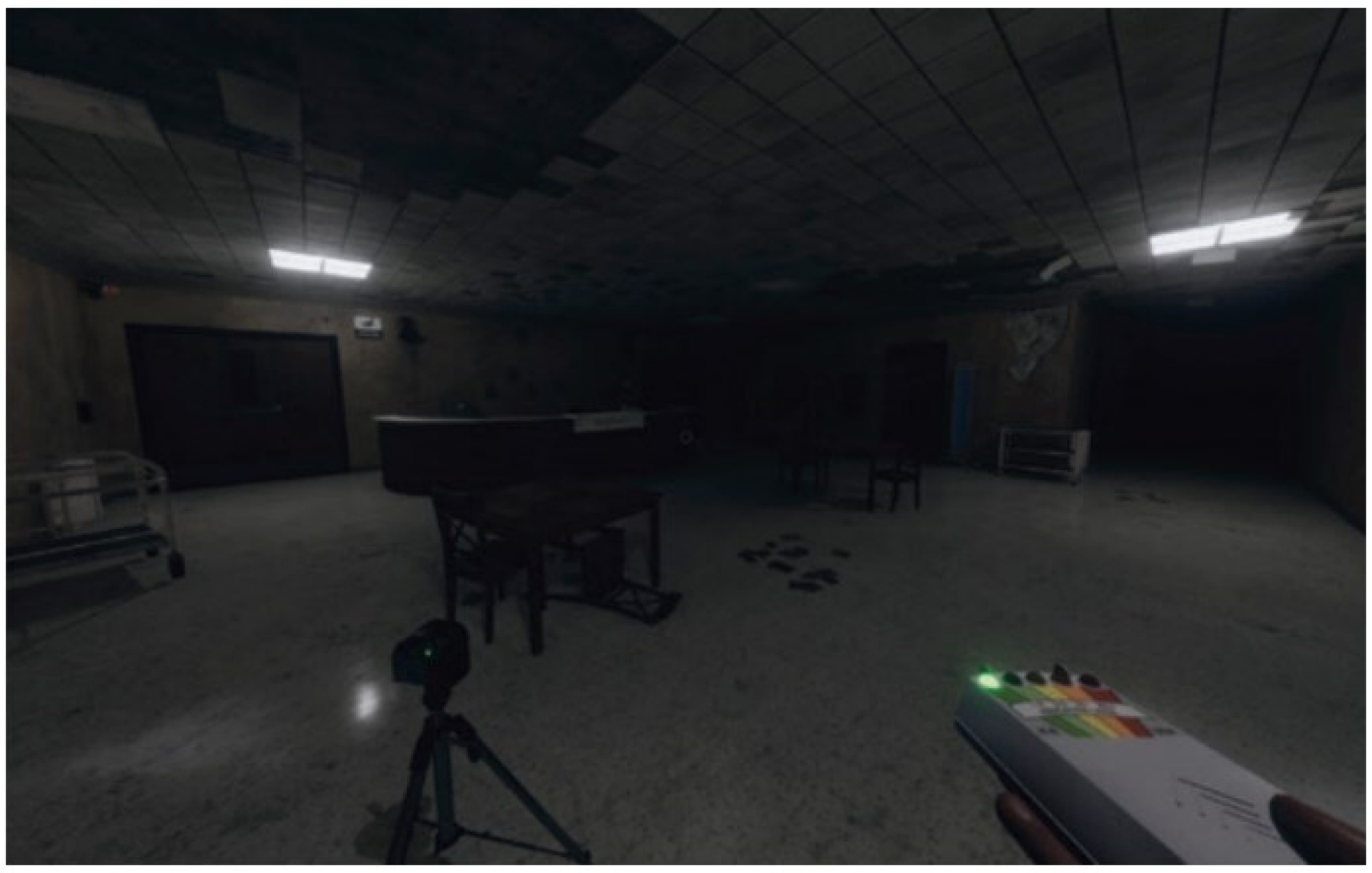
Avalanche in recent years is best known for its ambitious toys-to-life efforts with the Disney Infinity games, so the studio has an established track record in translating big licenses onto the gaming screen. But Harry Potter is a notoriously rich and complex universe to adapt, with a rabid fanbase ready to call out missteps. At first glance, Hogwarts Legacy looks to be the sort of robust and immersive game that the series has always deserved, but with only limited details, we still have a long time to wait to discover whether it might be the chosen one.
» **Matt Miller**



Phasmophobia

Fear with friends





» Platform
PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player
Online Action

» Publisher
Kinetic Games

» Developer
Kinetic Games

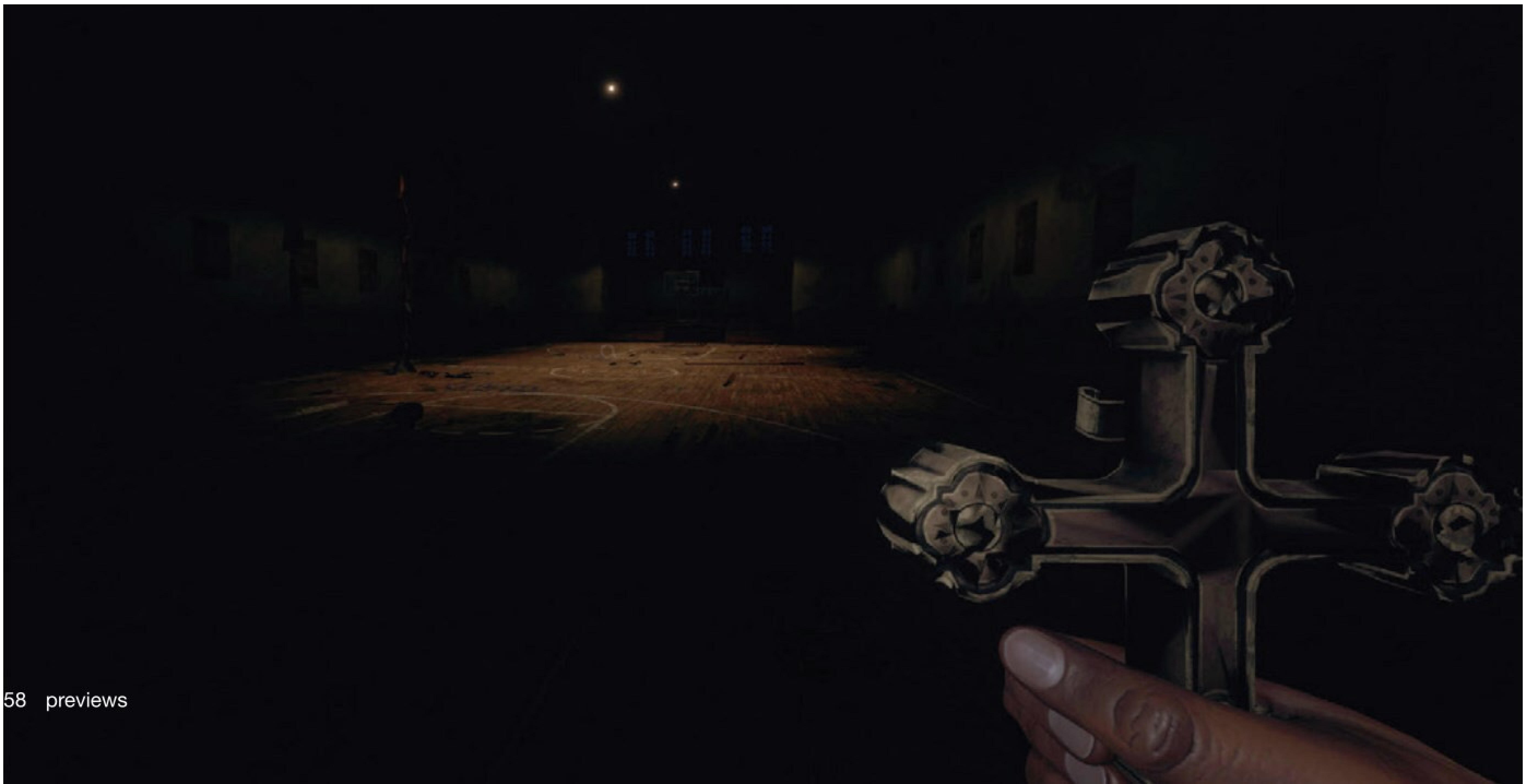
» Release
TBA

Ever watch those cheesy, but somehow compelling, ghost-hunting shows on TV? Now you can experience the joys of using an EMF detector, talking into a spirit box, and trying to snap the perfect picture of a malevolent ghost in Phasmophobia. Available now in Early Access, Phasmophobia experienced a huge boost in October due to the associated spooky holiday and a swarm of screaming streamers all daring each other to stay in rooms with terrifying apparitions. Phasmopobia is an extreme ghost hunt, as the ghosts are designed to hunt and kill intrepid hunters, and is best experienced with friends instead of random players online.

The core loop is simple: Head to a haunted location, identify what kind of haunting is taking place, and complete some bonus assignments like warding off the ghost with a crucifix, recording freezing temperatures with a thermometer, or getting a photo of some ghostly activity. You get a payout at the end of the mission based on what you accomplish, incentivizing you to get as many objectives completed as possible, but beware: If you don't come back from the mission alive you lose the equipment you brought. The cash rewards from mission completions can unlock all kinds of new loot (and replace gear you lost from dying) like motion detectors, strong flashlights, and parabolic microphones.

Now, the ghosts can hear you. One of the big draws as you wait for the lights to go out or a door to slam is that you can squawk into a spirit box and ask the ghost questions or just shout its name in an attempt to track down its location or piss it off. Angering the ghost puts you at risk, but also gives you the chance to get some better pictures for a big payout. In some locations you can even mess around with a Ouija board to communicate with the spirit. Some spirits deliberately go after those in your group who are making a racket, so the high-strung and easily scared hunters in your entourage may find themselves more vulnerable to attack – leading to even more screams and entertainment.

Currently, you can explore houses, cabins in the woods, abandoned schools, and asylums. These experiences have a range of inherent difficulties; the house has relatively few rooms to investigate, but the massive asylum can be a mind-wracking haunt even with high-quality gear at your disposal. We're not sure what the final version of Phasmophobia will look like, but right now it's the perfect way to spend time with your horror-loving friends. And the ones that hate horror, too; make sure to turn off the lights on them. Oh, and if the regular thrills and chills aren't enough for you, Phasmophobia also has VR support. » **Daniel Tack**



Little Nightmares II

Back for more unsettling sights

Little Nightmares was a horror game that put more of an emphasis on grotesque imagery over outright scares. As the raincoat-clad Six, you were defenseless against monstrously sized people who inhabited – and protected – an equally nightmarish world. Six managed to escape at the end of the game, but she's back in the sequel to help a new character, Mono, make his way out of a similarly horrible location. We got to experience a short snippet in a recent demo, and we're happy to report that Tarsier Studios hasn't mellowed out over the past few years.

Six is along for the ride in the demo, but I don't take control of her at any point. Instead, she's there to offer support for Mono, who wears a paper sack with eyeholes over his head. That support comes in the form of simple things, such as providing boosts to reach high places or holding a door shut while something does its best to escape. I was a little apprehensive that having a duo as the game's focus would diminish the creepiness factor, but exploring the space necessitates plenty of splitting up. For much of the time, it was just Mono and his flashlight against the dark and a host of ambulatory mannequins. So yeah, it's still unsettling.

The demo starts in what appears to be the lobby of a hospital. As I work my way through various wings and rooms to find fuses to power an elevator, it's clear that it's not exactly a normal one. The building is run-down and in various states of disrepair, and its patients are partially assembled (or disassembled) mannequin-like constructs. I cautiously sneak past the first few that I see, bracing for one of them to come alive and snatch me. It doesn't happen. The tension ratchets up with every step I take, helped along with an excellent discordant soundtrack that sounds like an orchestra's instruments are being pulled apart. When the first mannequin lurches to life, it's almost a relief.

The creatures in this part of the game aren't the oversized people we were introduced to in the first Little Nightmares. Instead, these constructs are strange hybrids of flesh and wood. Some have bandaged heads, while others don't appear to have anything at all above their neck stumps. They're all interested in Mono, however. Fortunately, they don't approach when they're captured in Mono's flashlight beam. Unfortunately, once they're in the dark again, they snap back to life in frenzied, jerky animations. It's deeply unsettling, and their insistence on chasing Mono makes for an exceptionally tense series of retreats.

These photophobic foes are among the least of my problems. The trickiest challenge I face comes from disembodied prosthetic hands, which move around on the tile like spiders. They lunge and retreat at Mono, rearing back and leaping at his face. His paper bag is no use against their grip, as I discover. At first, all I can do is bait them into attacking, and then sprint away while they're disoriented. Eventually, I locate pipes and other weapons to temporarily gain the upper hand. As empowering as it is to mash them into the ground, that kind of power is fleeting; Mono's small size makes it unrealistic to drag weapons around for too long.

Finally, Six and Mono's "divide and conquer" approach pays off, and they're able to bring the elevator back to life. What lurks below is definitely on brand: A giant, roly-poly man swings from the ceiling, battering a bookshelf with his bulk. He spies us, and his head rolls back to stare at an impossibly weird angle. Just as I yelp out, "Nope!" the demo ends. Even though I'm not exactly looking forward to meeting this guy again, I can't wait to see what happens next. » **Jeff Cork**

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Tarsier Studios

» Release
February 11

Final Fantasy XVI

A world of crystals and creatures

» Platform
PS5

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
TBA

Years ago, Final Fantasy games released at a regular cadence. Between 1997 and 2002, the series had five mainline installments (Final Fantasy VII through Final Fantasy XI), never keeping fans waiting long for the next imaginative RPG world. However, the release of a core Final Fantasy title is a much rarer event these days, so the reveal of each new entry is more important than ever. Square Enix capitalized on that fact when it showed off Final Fantasy XVI for the first time during a virtual PlayStation 5 showcase, using the opportunity to demonstrate what the next generation holds for this long-running franchise.

The trailer has a variety of intriguing moments, jumping between cutscenes and gameplay to offer a tantalizing (if incomplete) vision of what Final Fantasy XVI is all about. Summoned beasts (called Eikons in this entry) and crystals play important parts in the story, and sit at the center of a political tale about warring nations in the world of Valisthea. The footage emphasizes the role of familiar summons like Shiva and Titan, while the game's key art features a standoff between Phoenix and Ifrit.

We know the plot revolves around at least two heroes: brothers Clive and Joshua Rosfield. Joshua is able to wield the power of the Eikon Phoenix, while his older sibling is a knight sworn to protect him. The pair are also accompanied by a young friend and confidant named Jill Warrick, who is practically family to the brothers.

Final Fantasy XVI features iconic beasts like chocobos and a Malboro, and the trailer shows the heroes squaring off against the latter in combat. We can only guess how battles function at this phase, but they are clearly real-time and involve stylish attacks and special abilities. Though all Final Fantasy titles for the past 15 years have used unique battle systems, this one appears to be more inspired by the action-focused approach of Final Fantasy XV than the turn-based entries of the past.

The creative team behind Final Fantasy XVI is another point of interest. Producer Naoki Yoshida and director Hiroshi Takai are best known for their efforts in turning Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn into a huge success after the disastrous release of the MMO's original version. With so much expertise in the online space, it raises questions about the form Final Fantasy XVI will eventually take. Is it a traditional single-player game? Does it incorporate some sort of multiplayer element? The currently available information doesn't address these questions directly, so fans will have to wait to learn more.

In a message accompanying the reveal, Yoshida says, "Our next big information reveal is scheduled for 2021, so in the meantime, I expect everyone to have fun speculating." Additionally, a comment from Takai ensures that no one gets their hopes up for a release anytime soon: "Though we're pouring our hearts and souls into this project each and every day, it may still be some time before we can get it into your hands," he says. "However, I promise it will be worth the wait!" Whenever it's ready, PlayStation 5 owners will be playing Final Fantasy XVI first; the game has been announced as a console exclusive for Sony's next-gen platform, though Square Enix could eventually bring it to other systems as well.
» Joe Juba

Grounded

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the yard …

Obsidian has kept its promise so far, using player feedback to make Grounded better. Since it hit Xbox Game Preview back in July, the team has added new areas to explore in the backyard, zipline travel, and a fearsome encounter against a (comparatively) massive crow. Its latest update is the biggest one yet, adding a koi pond and its fearsome fishy resident. Players who choose to explore the pond's depths do so at their own peril, thanks to its patrolling koi and, unfortunately, a new aquatic spider.

"The koi pond was designed in November of last year, so that's how far in advance we were prepping this," says game director Adam Brennecke. "We always knew we wanted a koi pond. We were designing and discussing what we could do with this area and make it cool. We made a big list of how many creatures could exist in this area, and one of them was the diving-bell spider." That real-life creature has a remarkable habit of securing air bubbles so that it can breathe while hunting for prey underwater. "We were like, 'Yep, that one's on the list,' just because we knew, even at that stage, how cool spiders were in the game and how scary they were, and we just wanted to expand on that."

The koi itself isn't exactly something that glides around a beautiful suburban water feature. For one, the pond, like the rest of Grounded's backyard setting, has entered into a state of neglect. The water is murky and foul-looking, which makes it easy to get surprised by any number of water-based critters. "We've all seen those koi fish that are the big badasses in the pond, and they look so gnarly, like they've been there forever," Brennecke says. "They're all scraped up. That's what we wanted to get across; this thing's been here for a long time, and it basically owns this area. This is the koi's turf. This creature owns this area, and you're just a little speck in it."

The koi isn't outright hostile to you, but it will become aggressive if you get too close or approach certain areas within the pond. There's a good chance you'll find one of those spots as you explore, along with several other points of interest. An underwater lab provides some tantalizing new narrative details, and your tiny character can find objects like toy dinosaurs and quarters in and around the pond.

Brennecke says this is the biggest update that Grounded has received so far, but that the team isn't about to stop thinking of ways to improve their survival game. Combat is getting some tuning, after early feedback indicated that element of the game was too static. "We took a step back and we looked at a lot of games with combat that we liked and analyzed them in depth, and one thing we found was we felt like we didn't have enough creature attacks," he says. "The spider, for example, had three attacks. What if we added three more variations? What would that do? That's kind of what we're doing right now with all of our creatures."

The team is also looking at the concept of pets, and how they might fit into Grounded's world. "We want to have the pet aphid, for example, where you can have that aphid and it follows you around and you can name it," Brennecke says. "These are all just ideas right now on paper. I think that's something where we really want to have that experience of having something that you can take care of. I think that's the goal of that."

They're not pets, per se, but Brennecke says his team is trying to find ways that players could interact with the game's ants in more interesting ways. "I think that's a really cool thing that we want to explore, of having ways of making ants be controlled by the player and you can have the ants do certain things. … I think once the player can interact with that layer of the A.I., I think there are going to be a lot of cool opportunities for us as game developers, but I think the players will enjoy that, too."

Brennecke says his team has grown to add a couple of engineers to help with incorporating the Xbox Series X/S. The new consoles will shrink load times and enhance the overall framerate and gameplay responsiveness. Those hires aside, Brennecke says he wants to maintain the small size of his team. "Overall, the team is the same size and we're going to continue to make cool stuff. We have tons of ideas, and we just hope we have enough time to get those features in and make them shine."

» **Jeff Cork**

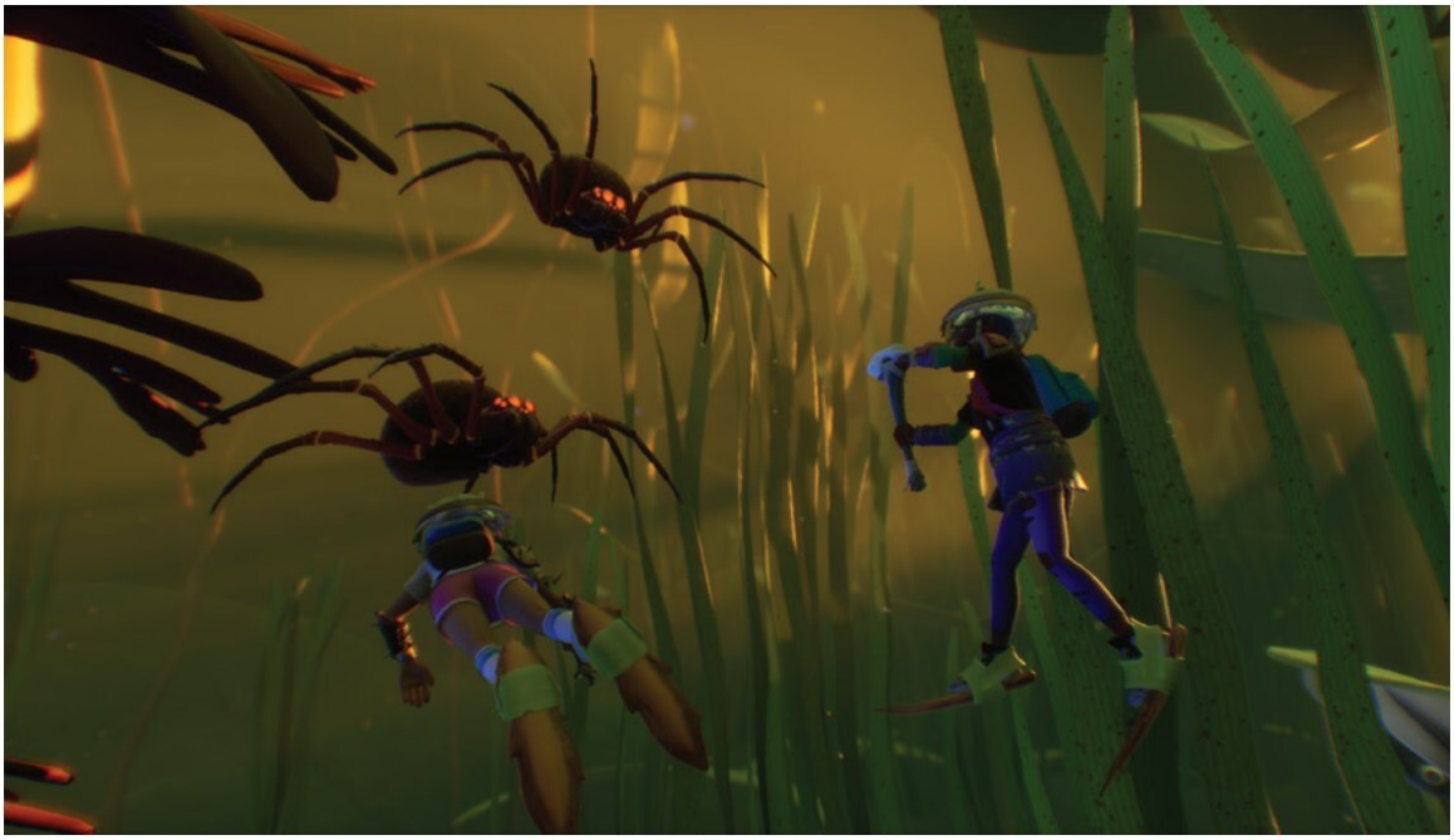
» Platform
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Obsidian

» Release
November 10



Monster Hunter Rise

Hunting back on the go

» **Platform**
Switch
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Capcom
» **Developer**
Capcom
» **Release**
March 26

Monster Hunter: World hasn't made it to a Nintendo platform, and fans have been upset that a core entry is missing from a place that the franchise has long called home. Now, Monster Hunter is coming back to Nintendo in a big way, with Monster Hunter Rise. Featuring many core aspects of the series and a few small iterations and tweaks, Rise looks to continue the legacy of the huge boss hunts and colorful co-op that has come to define the Monster Hunter games.

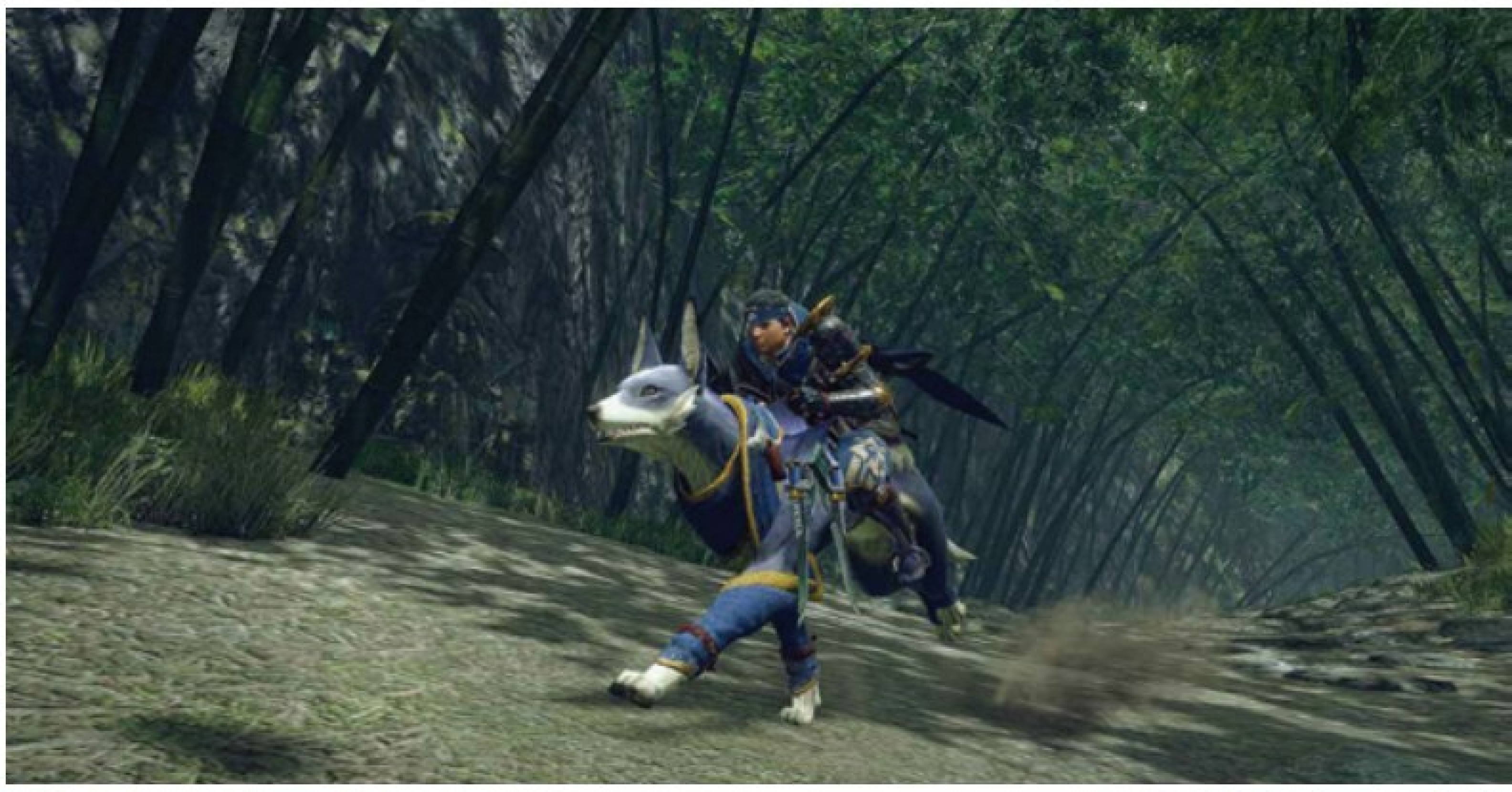
First, forget those old legacy load-screens between zones. One load surfaces the entire map, so you won't need to chase monsters between areas, and you won't be able to cheese the zone edges for safety, either. Those who remember the annoyance of endless loading screens as they'd chase monsters from area to area can breathe a sigh of relief. Another issue that frustrated players in Monster Hunter: World was the inability to skip cutscenes – you can skip them in Rise.

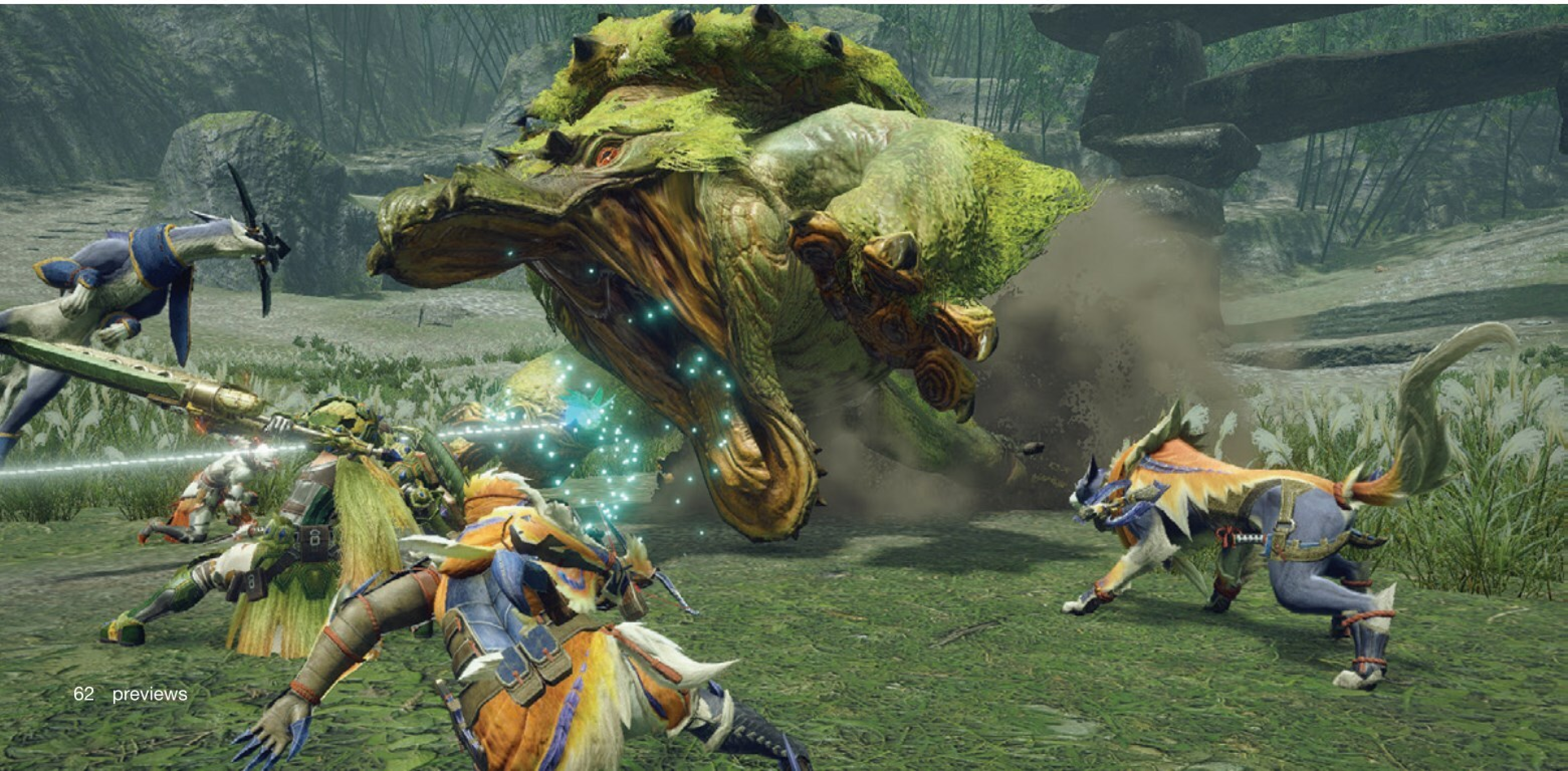
Next, mounts and pals. The feline Palicoes make a return as support specialists, but a new peppy pet is now available: the Palamute. With these dog companions, characters can now bring along a much more offensive-oriented pal on hunts. Palamutes will synchronize their attacks to land with yours, creating deadly combos and powerful assaults. You can also ride the Palamutes, and use them to travel quickly across terrain, creating a new useful way to both collect resources and hunt down fleeing monsters. As a single-player, you can enlist two companions at a time, allowing you to have a potent retinue of assistants. While other Monster Hunter games may force your Palico to pack up and go home when playing with other players, you can take two pals into a two-player game and one in a three or four-player experience.

If you remember the Clutch Claw from Monster Hunter World: Iceborne, Monster Hunter Rise's Wirebug appears similar. The Wirebug can be used as a traversal and grappling tool in the world and as a synergistic weapon in combat. The Wirebug works with each weapon differently, so expect to weave the Wirebug into your attack patterns and strategies.

While the development team says the game will be limited to low-rank and high-rank quests (No masters or G-Rank, the really tough stuff), we don't know if that could change later via DLC or expansions.

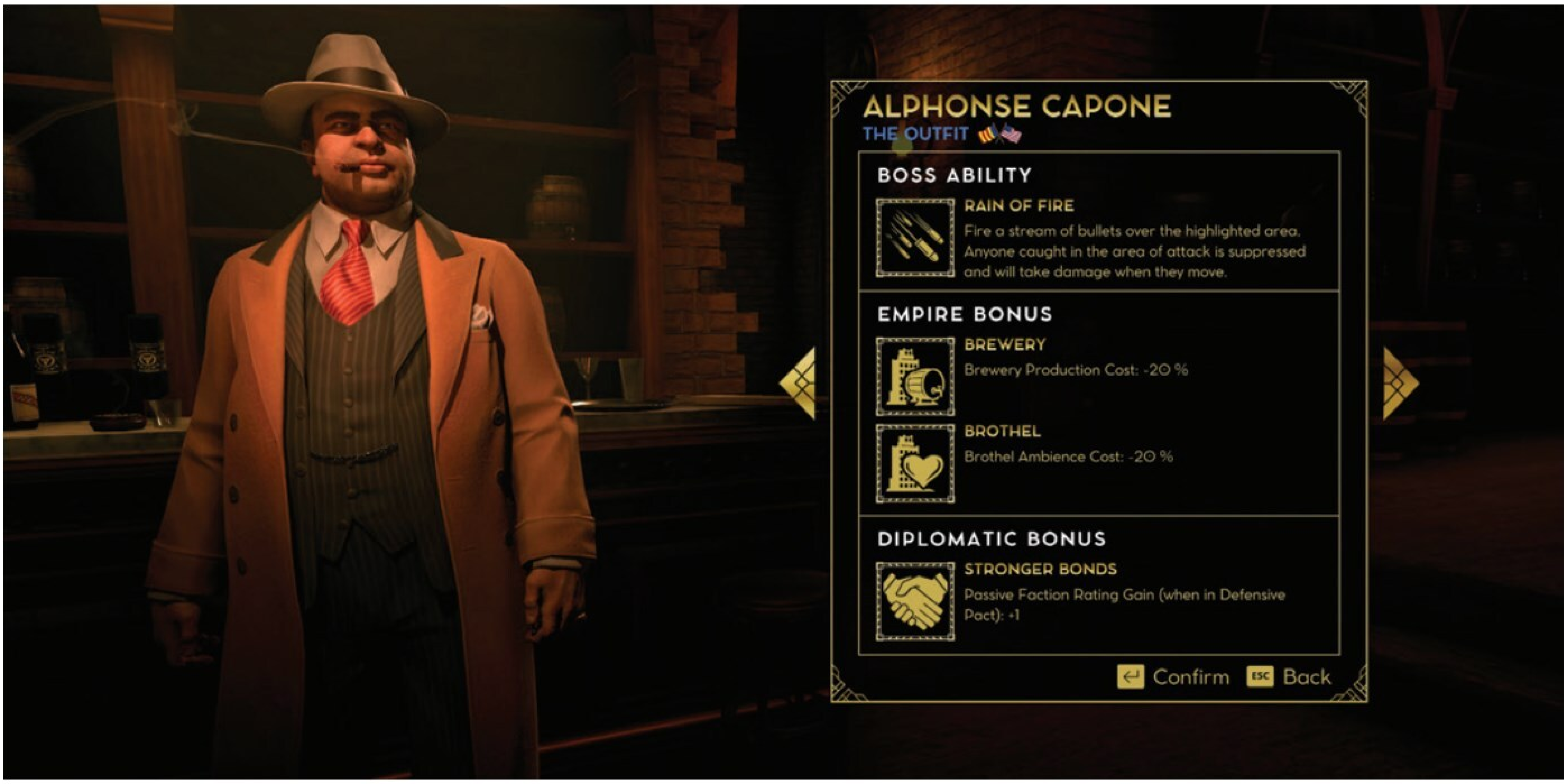
Monster Hunter Rise doesn't look like it's taking too many chances with the established formula, and that's probably just fine. We can't wait to check out new monsters when Monster Hunter Rise hits the Switch next year.
» **Daniel Tack**





Empire Of Sin

Pain and grain



ALPHONSE CAPONE

THE OUTFIT

BOSS ABILITY

RAIN OF FIRE

Fire a stream of bullets over the highlighted area. Anyone caught in the area of attack is suppressed and will take damage when they move.

EMPIRE BONUS

BREWERY

Brewery Production Cost: -20 %

BROTHEL

Brothel Ambience Cost: -20 %

DIPLOMATIC BONUS

STRONGER BONDS

Passive Faction Rating Gain (when in Defensive Pact): +1

American Prohibition was a tough time for many Americans; the ban on the production and sale of alcohol forced many reputable businesses to close. Thousands of Americans died drinking tainted liquor while others bled out in the streets, a result of gang wars fueled by illegal brewing operations. On the other hand, if you were willing to get your hands dirty and make some of your own bathtub gin, you stood to make a fortune. Romero Games' strategy/RPG Empire of Sin explores this violent era and gives players the chance to construct their own crime family before duking it out with other gangsters in prohibition-era Chicago.

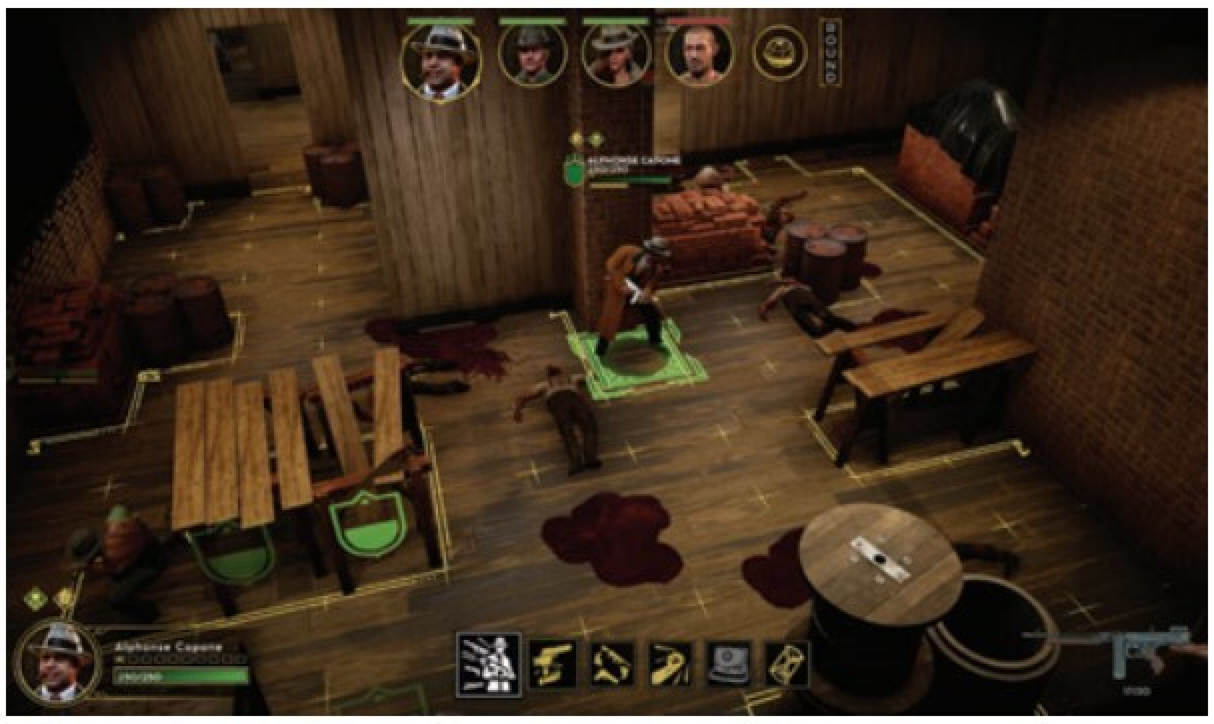
At the beginning of Empire of Sin, players choose from over a dozen different gangsters who lead their fly-by-night operation. While some of these figures are fictional, others are real people torn from the history books, such as Sai Wing Mock, a Chinese-American criminal who became the kingpin of New York's Chinatown, or Daniel McKee Jackson, the vice lord of Chicago who was a funeral director as well as a gambling-house owner. I began the game as Al Capone, who moved from New York City to Chicago in 1919. Empire of Sin doesn't aim to be a strict historical recreation; it's more of a criminal playground, but it's full of little historical details that could interest junior historians.

My first move as Capone is to invade a local gang leader's turf. I march into a nearby speakeasy run by Ronnie O'Neill, the leader of The Meat Packers gang, and begin shooting up the place. Combat in Empire of Sin takes place across a series of turn-based tactical encounters similar to strategy games like XCOM. You move your characters across a grid and take cover while flanking your enemies. Each member of your squad has a set of special abilities, which can range from passive skills that let them automatically return enemy fire to active abilities that allow them to shoot at every enemy on screen. Your boss character even has a unique super move, which is extra deadly. For example, Capone whips out a Tommy gun and fires wildly at every enemy within a certain radius, and this spread is often deadly.

Thanks to Capone's itchy trigger finger, I took over a couple of O'Neill's speakeasies as well as a brewery. This opened up Empire of Sin's larger management aspect, which gives you a high-level view of the city and lets you issue commands to your lieutenants as they enforce your rule. Your main goal is to take over as much of Chicago's criminal underworld as possible. One way to do this is by shooting up places and claiming those businesses for yourself, which I've already proven I'm pretty good at. Another way to take over the city is to use your ill-gotten gains to buy additional properties outright, which is less flagrant but just as effective.

Between combat encounters, you can spend time upgrading your businesses so they produce more alcohol and have a better ambiance. Additionally, you can increase your word-of-mouth advertising, so that more people are drawn to your establishments. A quick visit to the black market will let you purchase new weapons or supplies. Or you could entice more goons to join your organization. Finally, you can initiate sit-downs with other criminal leaders to call a truce or to ask them to team up in a war against a third party.

Empire of Sin should be out by the end of the year, which was a bit surprising because it's rough around the edges – I ran into a couple of game-crashing bugs. However, if Romero Games polishes the title before release, it could have something special on its hands; the strategy layer is deep, and the tactical combat seems rewarding. We hope it all comes together, because we can't wait to show the 18th amendment who's boss. » **Ben Reeves**



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1- Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Paradox Interactive

» Developer
Romero Games

» Release
December 1

Evil Genius 2: World Domination

A fun road to doomsday

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Rebellion Developments

» **Developer**
Rebellion Developments

» **Release**
2021

So many games task us with being the hero rushing into the lair of the supervillain attempting to destroy the planet, but very few let us control the maniacal villain on the opposite path. Evil Genius 2: World Domination effectively flips the script, putting you in the shoes of the titular evil geniuses as you build a lair, train minions, and attempt to take over the planet while fending off plan-thwarting secret agents. This follow up to the 2004 cult hit adds new geniuses, traps, and ways to build your base in hopes of delivering a more nefarious experience for everyone.

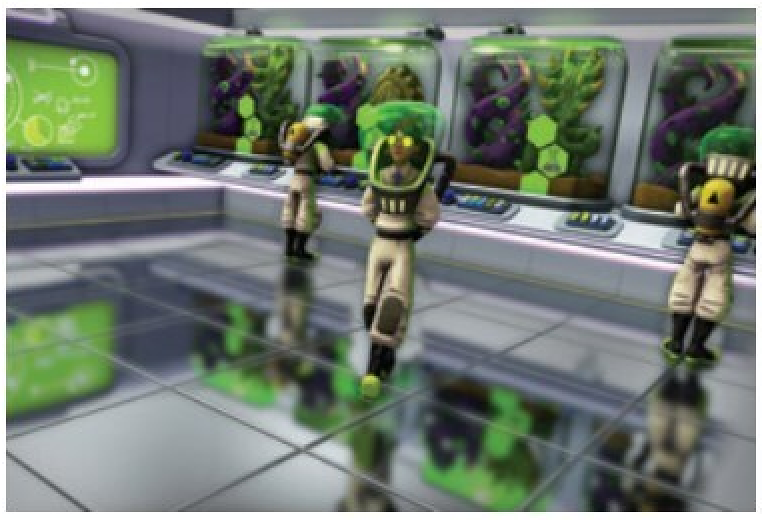
At the start of your attempt to take over the world, you choose from one of four evil geniuses: Maximilian delivers an all-around style of play, while Red Ivan tries to conquer the world with an iron fist. Ivan even has an AoE ability that makes all minions within the aura more productive. Whether you use this in the Control Room to influence multiple tasks at once or speed up a room's construction, this could be an effective tool for players.

As for the minions themselves, you can train the generic, low-level underlings to take on various specialties under the umbrellas of Muscle, Deception, and Science. This means that if you want to train a highly skilled hitman or a quantum chemist, Evil Genius 2 has you covered.

On top of your minions, you also have henchmen, who are the top-tier, righthand men and women of your organization. Eli Barracuda is a specialist in hand-to-hand combat and weaponry, while Jubei can teleport to get where he's going faster. If you'd prefer to take out the secret agents yourself, you can build traps, such as the Laser Disco or the Giant Fan. And yes, you can build a trap where the floor drops the agent into a pool of sharks.

One way to take over the world is to build a Doomsday Device and get the Forces of Justice to surrender. You can fire whenever, but once you choose a target and activate it, the Forces of Justice will get aggressive and try to make a daring attempt to stop you. Because of this, your lair goes into a high-alert state until the timer goes off, with all minions and henchmen keeping an eye out.

With so many ways to try and destroy and/or take over the world, Evil Genius 2: World Domination looks like a much more enjoyable road to doomsday than we're accustomed to. » **Brian Shea**



THE PATHLESS
ori AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS
GUILTY GEAR -STRIVE-
CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER Nintendo Switch Edition
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Kaze AND THE WILD MASKS

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Subnautica: Below Zero

A cold, hard look at the next chapter

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Unknown Worlds
Entertainment

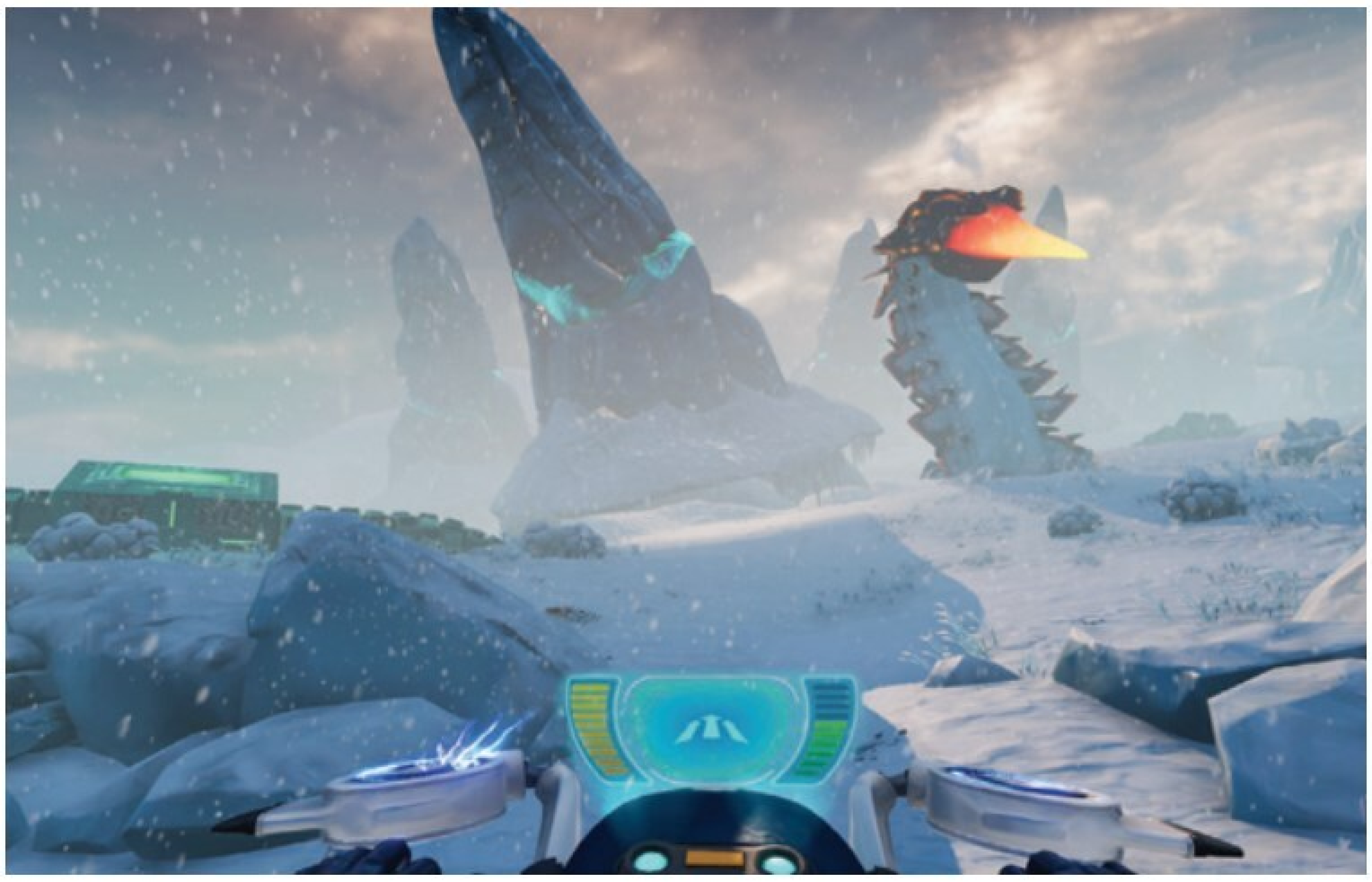
» Developer
Unknown Worlds
Entertainment

» Release
Early 2021

Subnautica: Below Zero, the follow-up to hit survival game Subnautica from Unknown Worlds Entertainment, has made waves since entering Steam Early Access in early 2019. The game builds upon the same fun (and harrowing) underwater survival gameplay with a new frozen backdrop, handy new tools, cool vehicles, and quality-of-life improvements. Below Zero is already a blast to play, and we finally know it will officially launch in early spring.

For fans who have missed out on the game in Early Access, Below Zero takes place in an arctic region of planet 4546B, the same world from the original Subnautica. This time players control Robin Ayou, an Alterra employee, who travels to the water world to investigate the mysterious death of her sister, Sam. Alterra claims Sam died due to personal negligence while visiting 4546B, but anyone who's played the first game knows to take Alterra's word with spoonfuls of salt – and so does Robin.

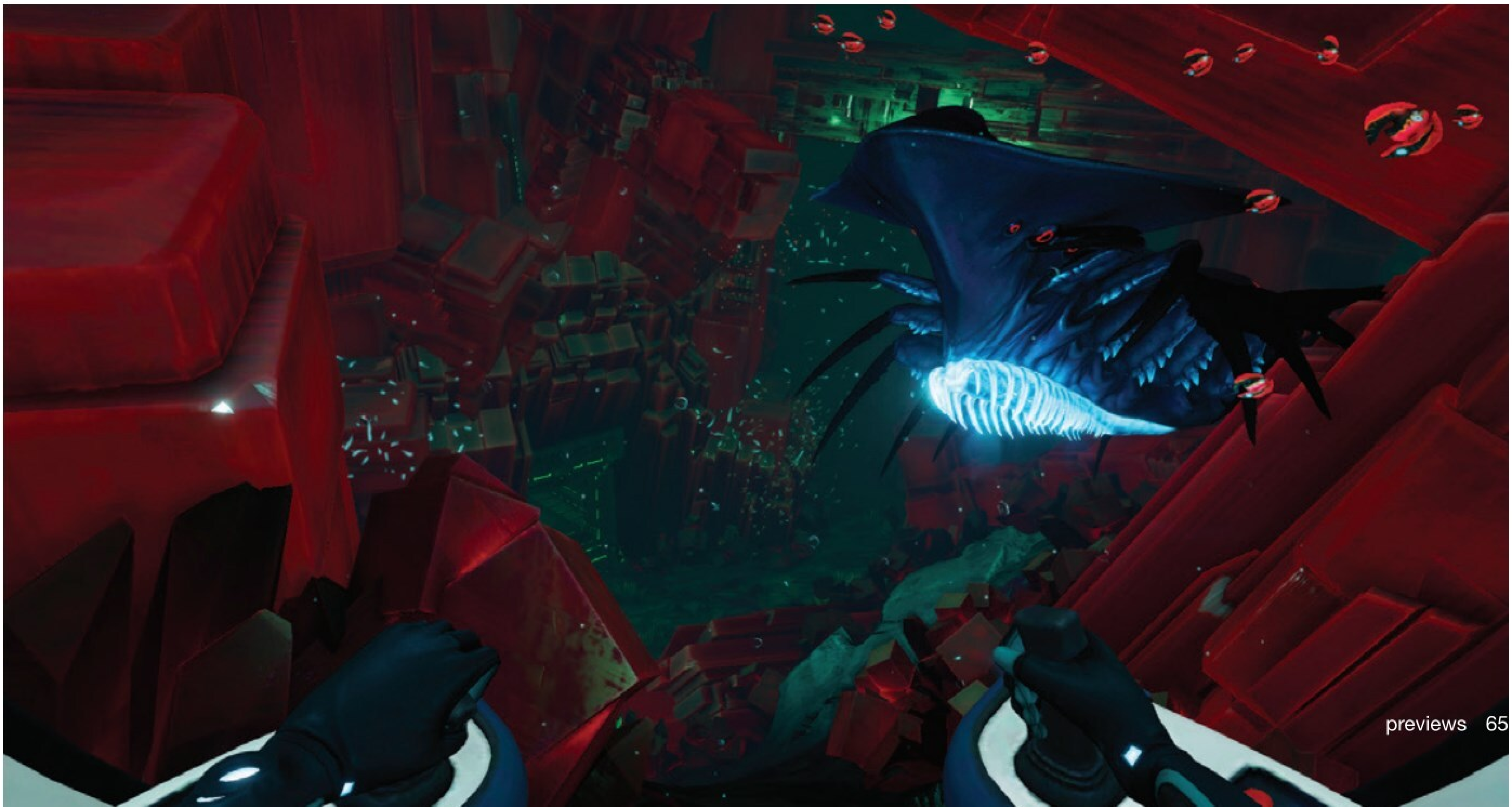
According to project lead David Kalina, this premise offers a nice contrast to the original's set-up while also making it newcomer-friendly. "Instead of arriving as a survivor not on your own will, this was an intentional decision by the character to come to this planet and find out what happened to her sister," Kalina explains. This doesn't mean Below Zero won't build upon the first game's narrative. Security guard Marguerit Maida, for example, returns. Missions also involve the planet's alien architect race. While much of the story is available in Early Access, players must wait for the full release to see how it concludes.



Below Zero features new biomes and sea creatures. New vehicles include the sea truck, a train-like machine with customizable cargo modules. Arctic shelves and landmasses encourage on-foot exploration as well. Players can craft a hoverbike called the Snowfox to zip around the icy landscapes. With a new setting comes new hazards, such as violent blizzards and the chilling temperature itself. There's also the Snow Stalker, a vicious (though admittedly cuddly) land mammal.

Crafting tools and structures is much easier thanks to the ability to pin recipes to the HUD. This dramatically reduces the constant trips to the PDA screen that plagued the first game. A nifty mineral detector homes in on specific ores, eliminating what Kalina describes as the "needle in a haystack" style search for precious materials. After recently adding full voice-acting to the game, Kalina says Below Zero is largely feature-complete, and that the team is focusing on polish and bug-fixing going forward.

Subnautica: Below Zero will be released for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, and PC. Unknown Worlds also revealed it plans to bring the game to next-gen hardware as well. Additionally, the team is partnering with Bandai Namco to release physical versions of Below Zero and the first Subnautica. So far, Subnautica: Below Zero is every bit as alluring as the original game, and the full release can't come soon enough. » **Marcus Stewart**



Resident Evil Village

The Resident Evil franchise has had its fair share of ups and downs over the years, but we couldn't be more excited for the next installment. Following the events of Resident Evil 7: Biohazard, protagonist Ethan Winters attempts to resettle his wife Mia into a "peaceful" mountain town. Unfortunately, horror finds the couple again, and Ethan soon discovers that his new hometown is teeming with witches, werewolves, and other grotesque evils. Capcom hasn't released any extensive new details on the game since summer, but that could change as we inch closer to release in early 2021.

Overcooked! All You Can Eat

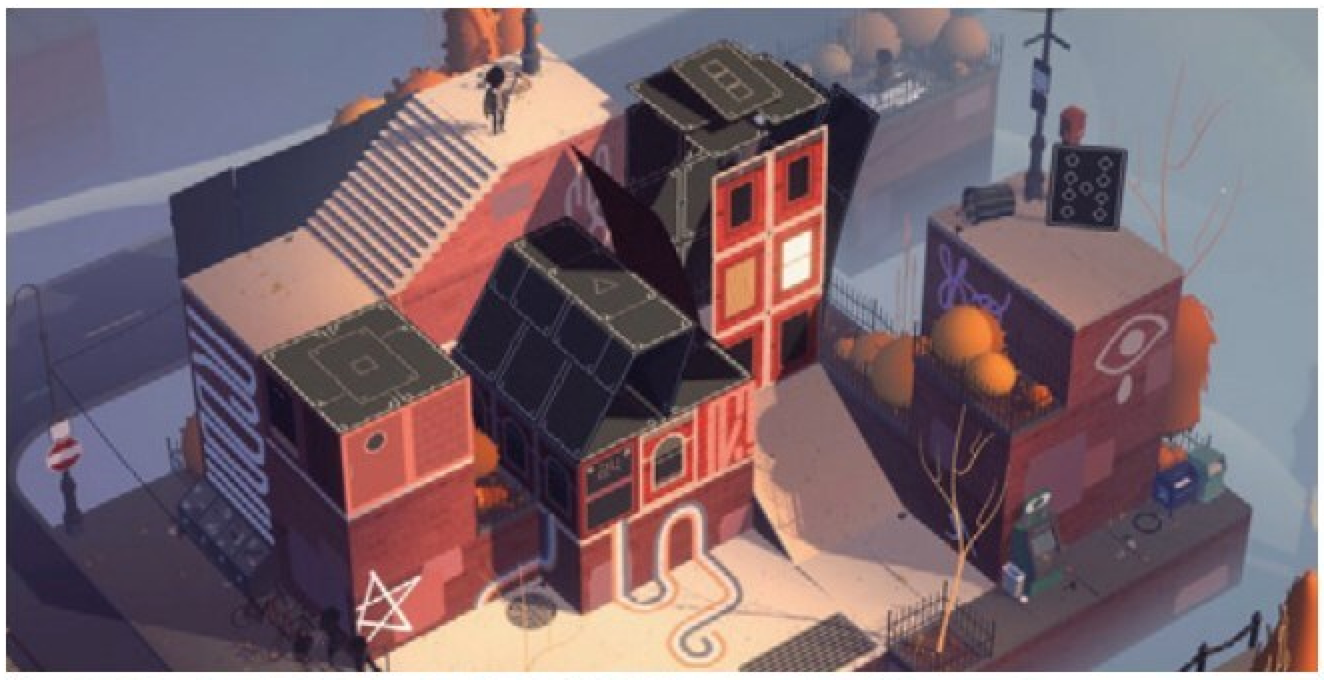
Overcooked's frantic co-op action makes the leap to next-gen with the All You Can Eat edition. This collection features all the levels and DLC from the first two games, rebuilt to support online co-op (with cross-play). It also adds new accessibility options, such as a color-blind mode, to ensure everyone is able to have a spot at the table. It's shaping up to be a delightful addition to the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, and is available now. Here's hoping you saved room for thirds!

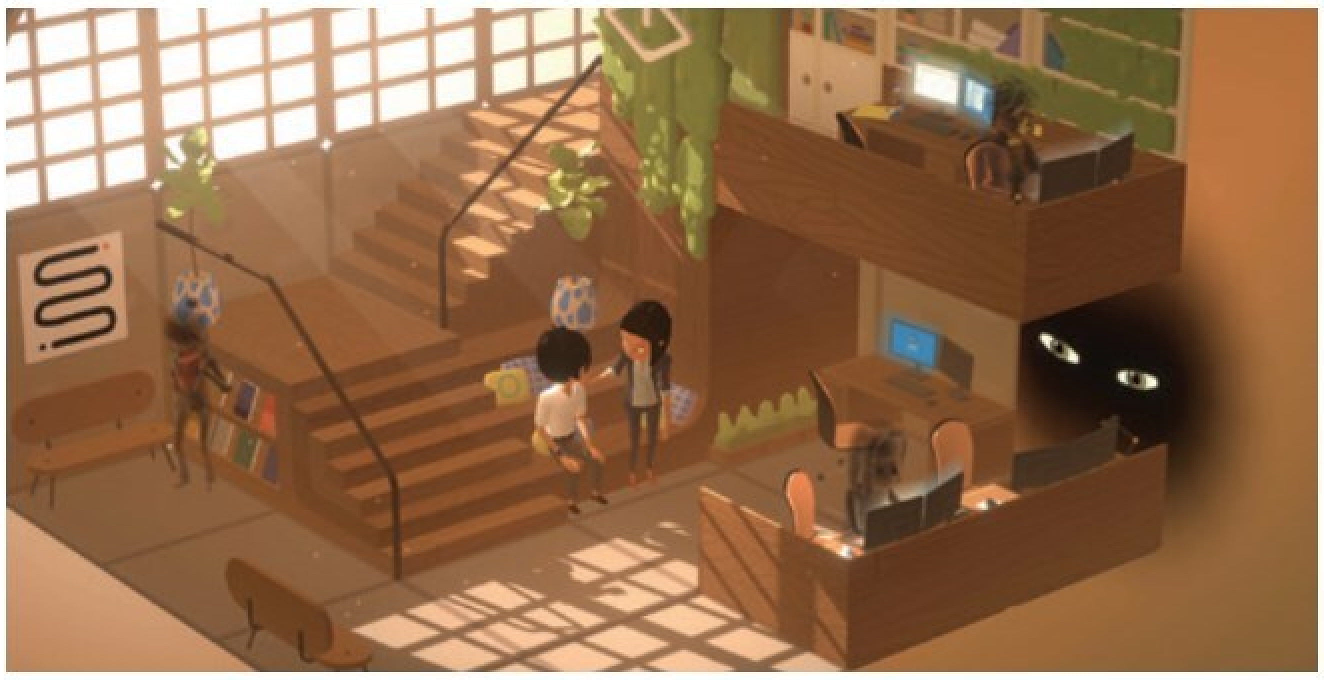
Five Nights At Freddy's: Security Breach

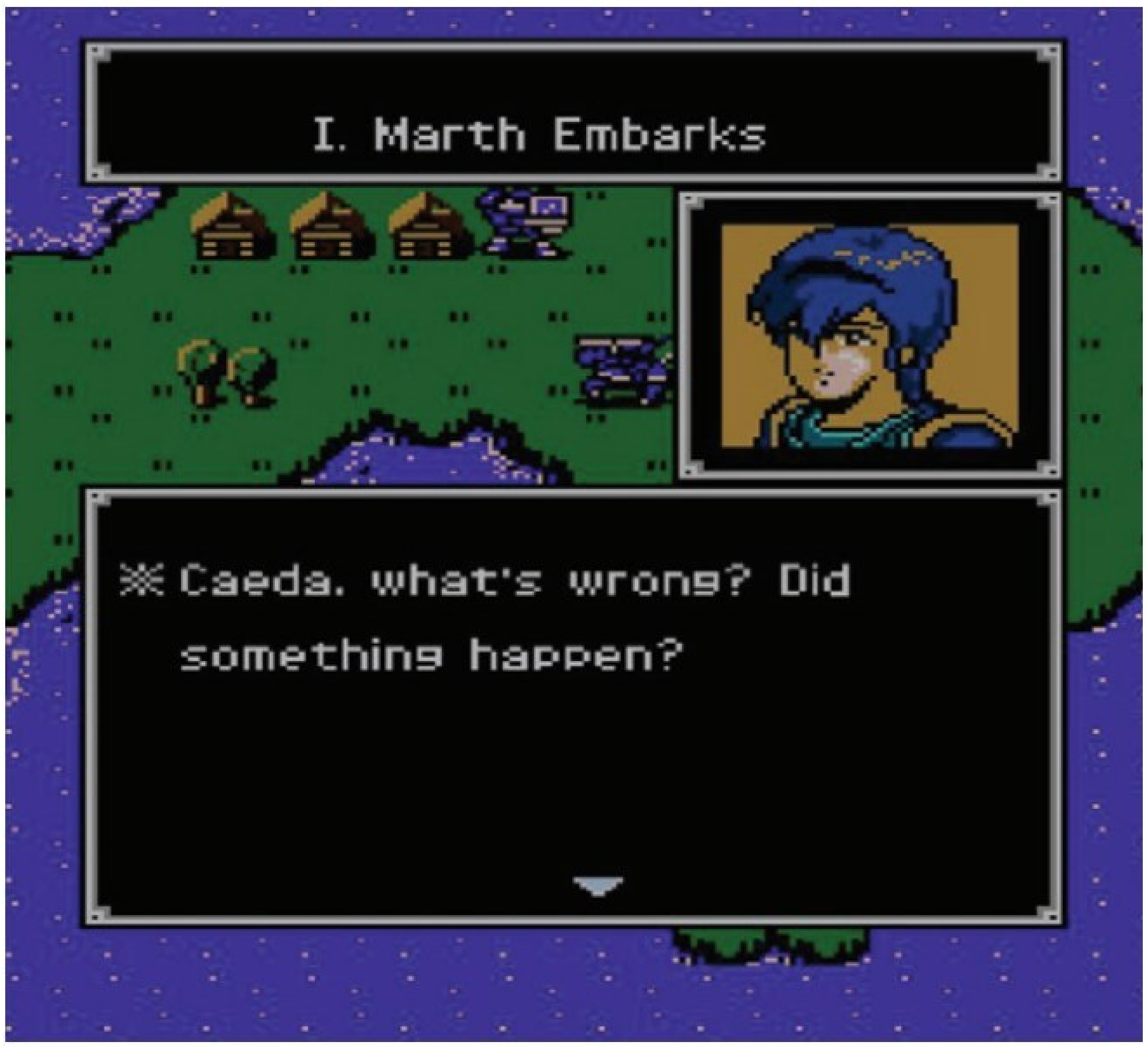
There are a lot of Five Nights at Freddy's games (the series won a Guinness World Record for most sequels in a year), but Security Breach looks to be one of the scariest yet. Aside from touting all the bells and whistles the PS5 has to offer, we don't know a lot about Security Breach, but we're looking forward to learning more about what next-gen jump scares it has to offer when we visit Freddy Fazbear's Mega Pizza Plex ourselves.

Where Cards Fall

After a successful launch on Apple Arcade last year, developer The Game Band is bringing its narrative puzzler to Switch and PC in early 2021, complete with new controls for each new platform. Assume the role of a nameless protagonist navigating through the highs and lows of growing up while you work through beautiful levels that require you to construct houses of cards to navigate its terrain and overcome obstacles.







I. Marth Embarks

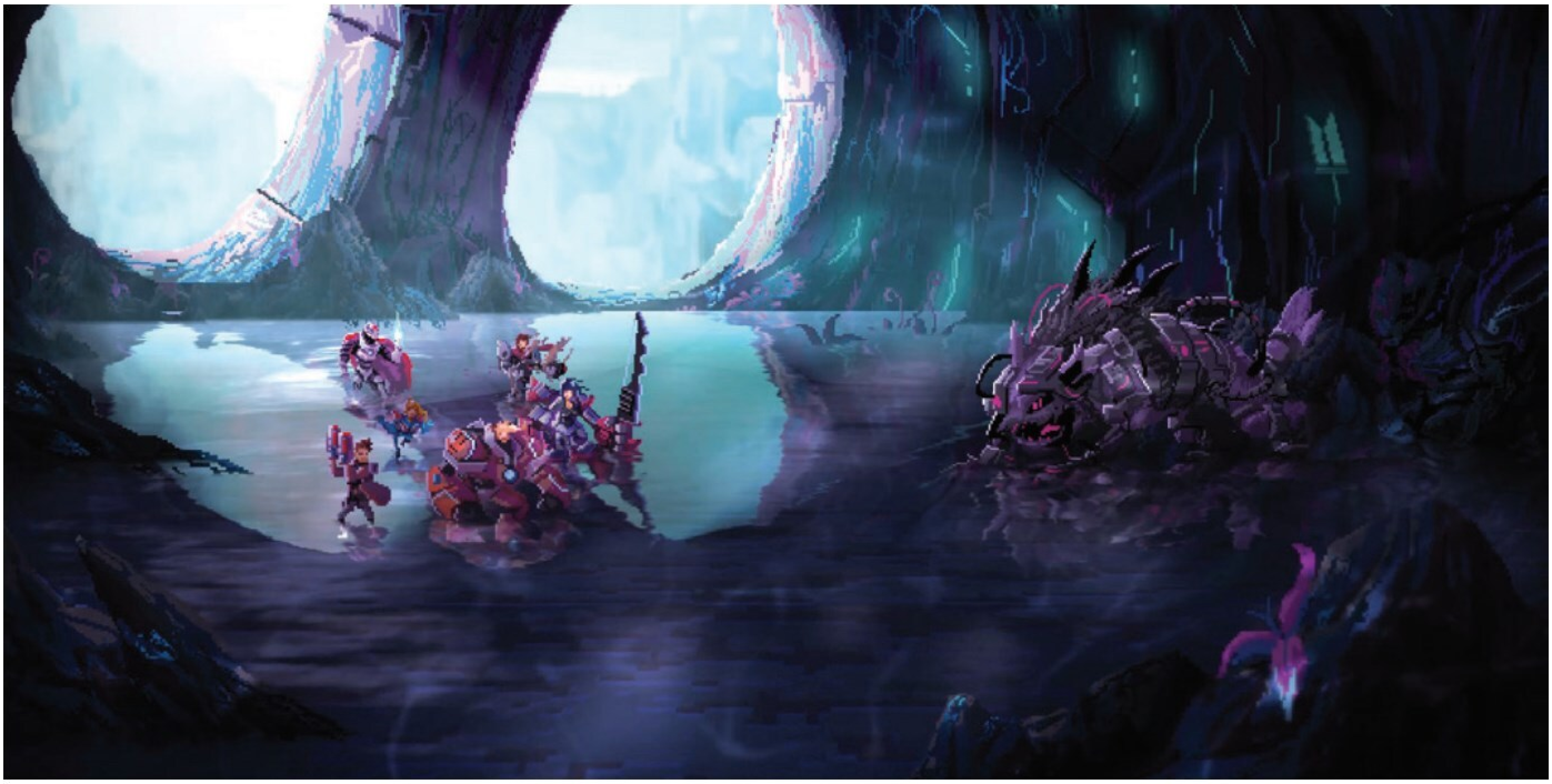
※ Caeda, what's wrong? Did something happen?

Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon & The Blade Of Light

After 30 years, the original Fire Emblem is finally making its way to the West with a launch on the Nintendo Switch. Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon & the Blade of Light arrives in the Switch eShop on December 4 and will be available until March 31. A limited-edition 30-year anniversary collector's edition was also revealed with a special series tribute. This is the game that started the iconic Fire Emblem saga, and now U.S. Switch owners can experience it for themselves.

Star Renegades

Ready for some tight, tactical roguelike RPG runs? Star Renegades lets you assemble a team of dimension-hopping adventurers and take down the evil empire as you build relationships and unlock an arsenal one attempt at a time. Even if you're not into strategy or roguelikes, the pixel-perfect graphics might be enough to warrant a play. After the recent PC launch, we're expecting to see Massive Damage's title come to console early next year.



Werewolf: The Apocalypse – Earthblood

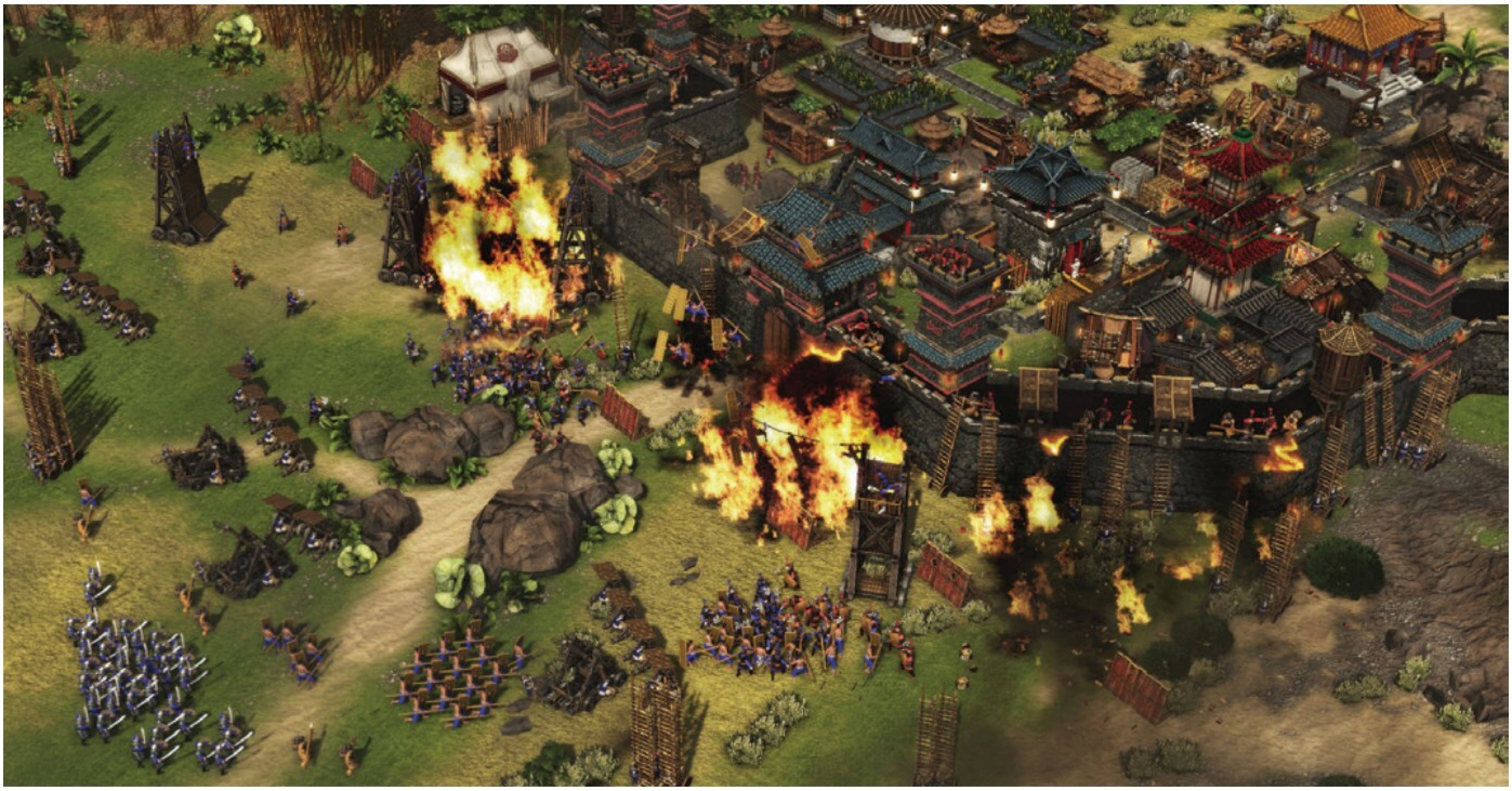
Cyanide Studios transforms the popular role-playing game into a savage action-RPG. As the rage-fueled Cahal, players must use his bestial skillset to bring a villainous oil company to its knees. Earthblood presents three styles of play: In wolf form, Cahal can sneak around undetected. Staying human allows him to converse with other people. Tearing enemies to shreds as the mighty werewolf easily appears to be the most satisfying transformation. Look for the game when it releases February 4 for PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC.

Axiom Verge 2

During a Nintendo indie showcase in 2019, developer Thomas Happ announced Axiom Verge 2, the follow-up to his acclaimed Metroid-inspired adventure. The game is both a prequel and a sequel, covering events before and after the original. It follows a new protagonist named Indra, who has a different arsenal of weapons and abilities to help her explore the twisting passages of a strange world. Initially planned for a fall 2020 release, Happ (who is effectively a one-man development team) recently revealed that the game is being pushed to the first half of 2021. Axiom Verge 2 will launch exclusively on Switch, though it may come to other platforms eventually.

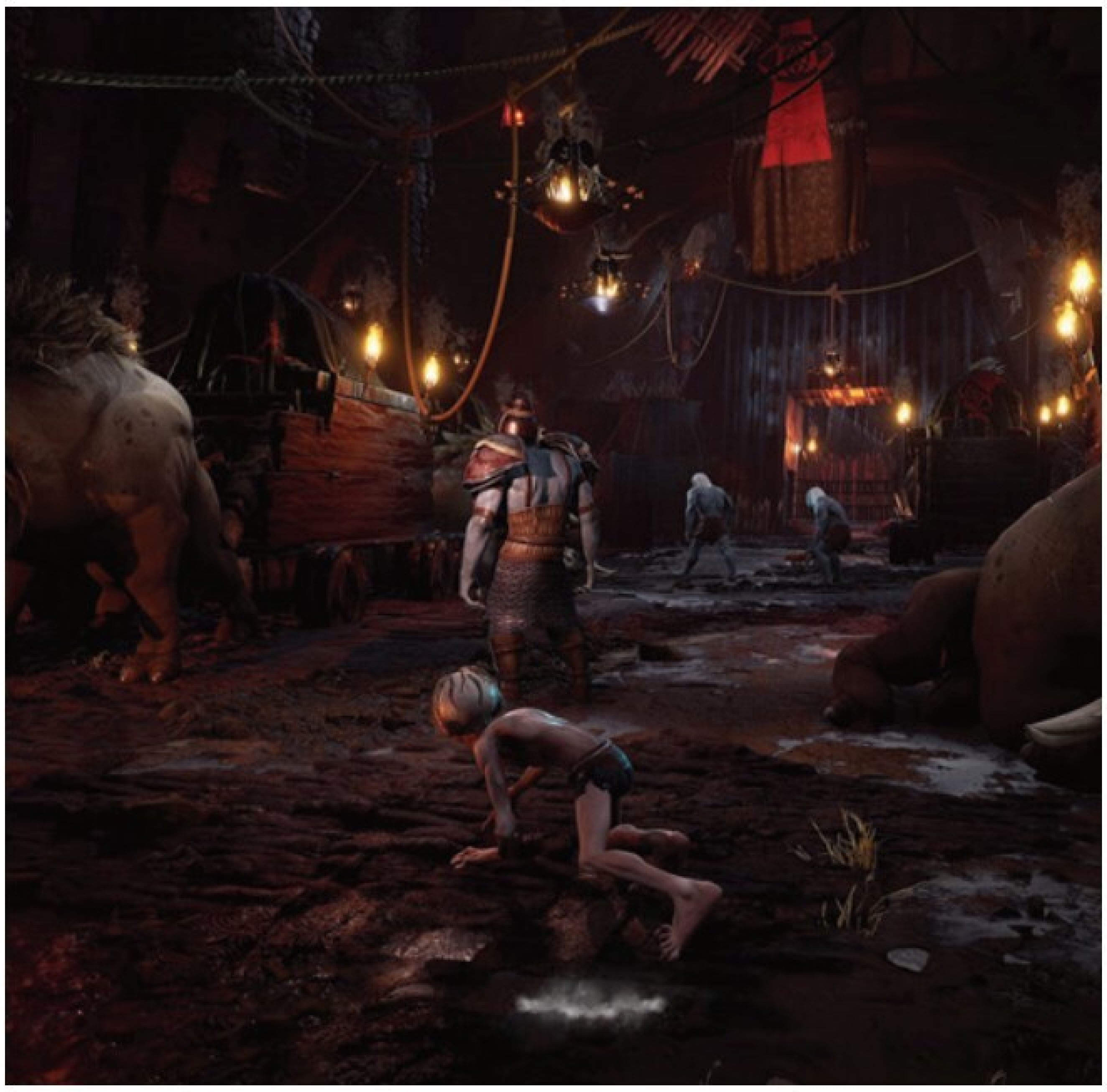
Stronghold: Warlords

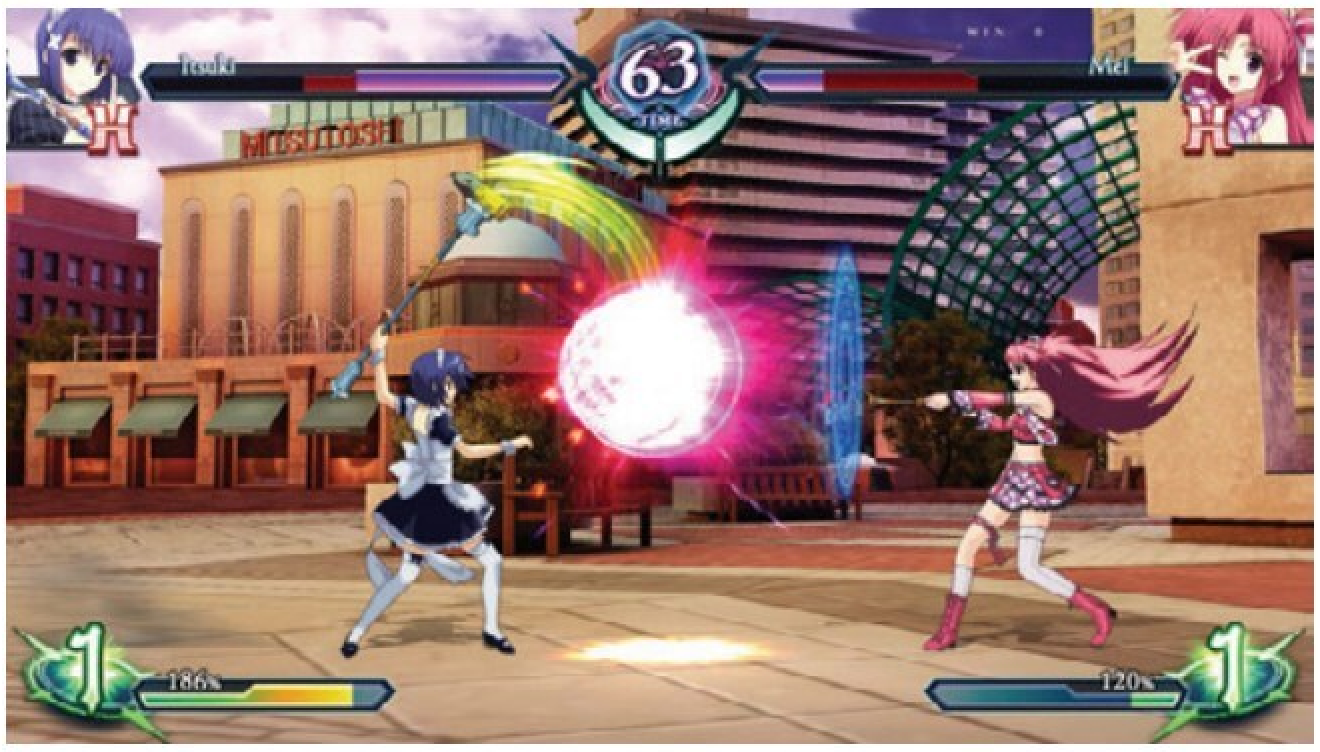
In campaigns and multiplayer, you take control of a Warlord to recruit an army. Forge new weapons, unlock units, build castles, and take over the world from your strongholds. Gunpowder research adds a new angle to the ancient assaults to employ new tools and powerful siege weaponry. Warlords is expected to land on PC in January.

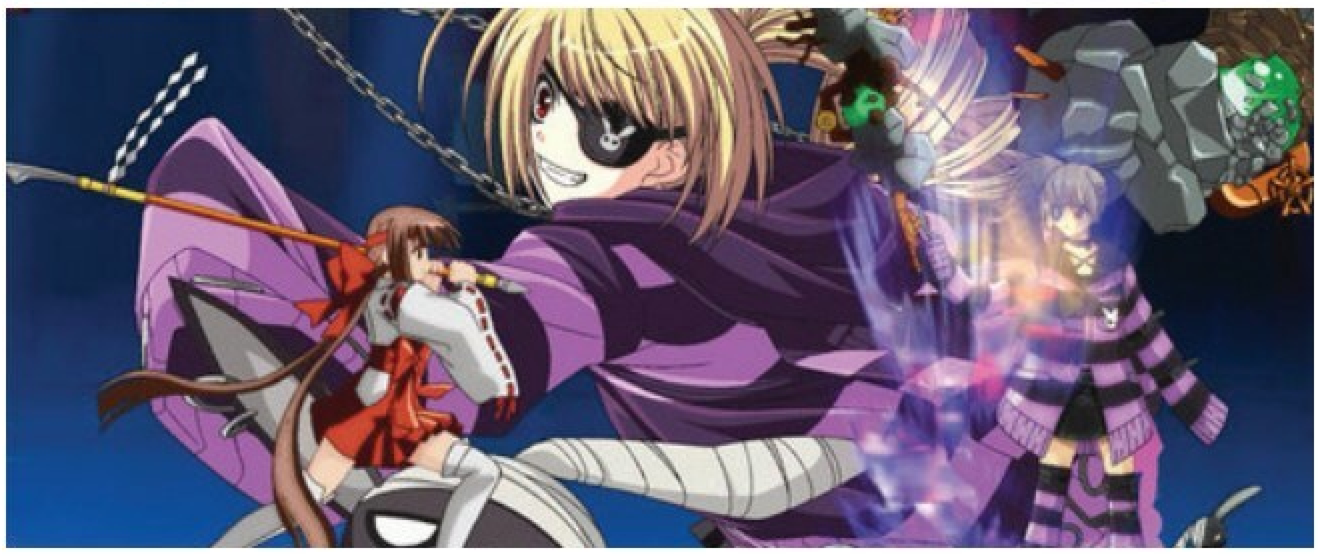


The Lord Of The Rings: Gollum

Daedalic is touting this new outing to Middle-earth as a robust stealth and action game. Players control the precious little guy as he infiltrates highly vertical play spaces, avoiding orcs and giant spiders on a trip into Mordor. Like the conflicted character from the novels and films, the game expresses Gollum's inner conflict, including monologues between his own split personalities. Watch for release on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC in 2021.







Phantom Breaker: Omnia

The original 2D fighter Phantom Breaker had a tumultuous development cycle that ended in the cancellation of the North American release. Phantom Breaker: Omnia (helmed by new publisher Rocket Panda) looks to revitalize its canceled precursor with extensive story content from previous Japan-only Phantom Breaker iterations, two new exclusive fighters, and tighter gameplay mechanics. Omnia releases in 2021 on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 331

74 Assassin's Creed Valhalla
77 Yakuza: Like A Dragon

The circumstances are rare that we choose to award a tie in our editor's choice, but this month brought two dramatically different games that each deserve recognition. Assassin's Creed Valhalla continues the history-spanning open-world series with a rewarding trip back in time into the fascinating life of a Viking warrior. Meanwhile, Yakuza: Like a Dragon is a phenomenal step forward for the long-running franchise, with a new protagonist and a fresh, bizarre energy that is hard to resist.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

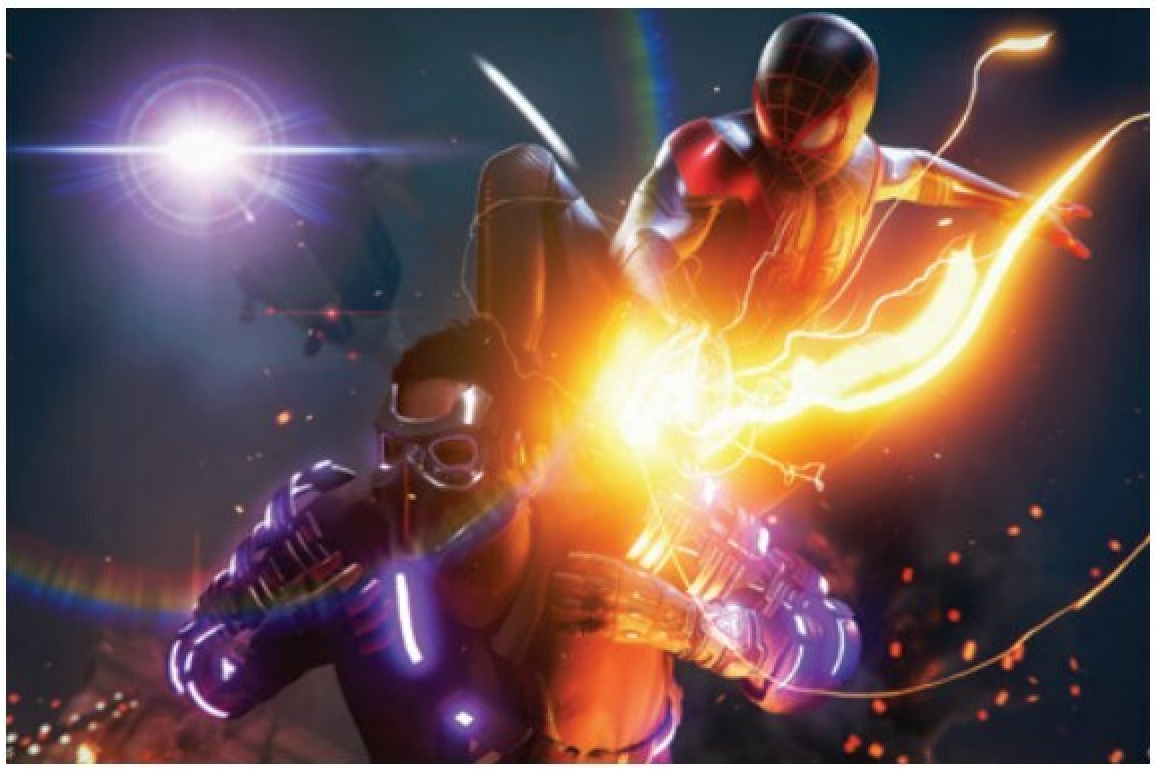
10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Bug snacks IRL.

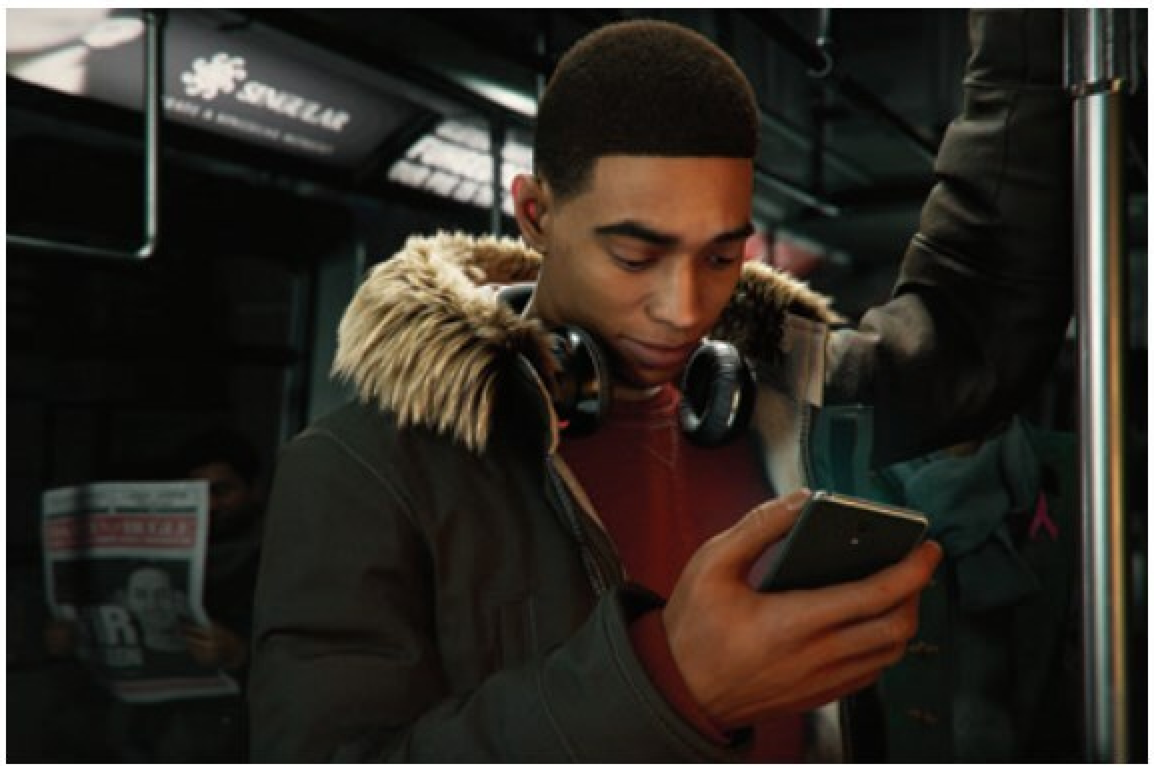
For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

An electrifying second act

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** November 12 **Rating** T





Electricity surges through Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, delivering a powerful charge to the web-slinging action, and a warmth to the family-focused story. Even though this sequel runs at roughly half the length of Peter Parker's 2018 adventure, it is consistently engaging and powerful, only coming up short in the impact the villains have on the entire experience.

Miles is Peter's understudy, and while he's just learning what it means to be a hero, he embraces the opportunity and stands tall on his own. His actions are not as refined as Peter's, but he spins a more complex web on the battlefield, intertwining fisticuffs and stealth in glorious ways to decimate his foes. Miles is brilliantly brought to life by actor Nadji Jeter, who gives him an innocence that anchors most scenes and makes him a character you can root for. Miles is just getting to know his new home of Harlem, a beautifully realized location with a wide variety of cultures, languages, and festive holiday decorations to soak in.

By having Miles' first days as Spider-Man unfold offscreen through the first game's DLC, Insomniac sidesteps some of the awkward growing pains of a new hero. From the moment you take control of Miles, he feels like a skillled Spider-Man; he swings dangerously across crowded city streets, shoots webbing to stop speeding cars, and uses his Spider-Sense to slip through streams of bullets. In these opening moments, Miles' moveset feels a bit like a carbon copy of Peter's, but that changes quickly once he gains access to his new powers.

Miles is different from his mentor in two huge ways. The biggest is his ability to camouflage and disappear completely from sight. This technique not only makes stealth easier and more satisfying, it also creates the opportunity to reset encounters. Enemies can lose sight of Miles and return to their patterns, so you can try picking them off silently again. This reduces some of the difficulty, but camo augments these conflicts nicely, and also makes Miles feel like an entirely different kind of hero than Peter.

His second unique power is called Venom (not that Venom), which he can use to electrify punches, dashes, and jumps. The Venom maneuvers are incredibly fun to use, and push you to think differently during combat, as you're always looking to clump enemies together so the Venom's electrical jolt immobilizes numerous targets at once. Insomniac also zooms the camera in to give these devastating strikes a more satisfying wallop, but this also makes the player's vision more limited, which causes some issues with enemies recognition. The tighter view is not a huge setback, but I felt like I had better visibility and awareness while controlling Peter in the first game.

Additionally, combat scenarios never escalate to the crazy levels that Peter faced. You won't see any aerial units or truly massive waves of enemies. Most encounters end quickly, yet are always exciting, and are nicely sewn into missions. The open-world activities are better designed this time around, with a strong focus on limiting repetition. You don't have to engage many crimes at all.

As you explore the open world, Miles' bio-electrical abilities also enhance his web-swinging. A burst of Venom sends him higher into the air or into a quick dash, and both add a bit more superhero might to exploration. Using these abilities pushes the player to do aerial tricks to fill their Venom meter, which again makes your time in the air more active and all the more fun.

Everything you do branches beautifully off of the central narrative arc, which focuses intimately on Miles and his family. The slower moments are easily the game's best; some are even delivered as fun musical montages. Insomniac put a lot of heart and care into these sequences, and they go a long way in making the big reveals and dramatic moments click.

All of the story-focused missions and side activities are nicely designed, and often lead to great set-piece moments (the introductory Rhino battle is jaw-droppingly awesome) and rewarding payoffs along the lines of new suits or additional activities coming online.

I thoroughly enjoyed how Miles' story unfolds, but it hangs its mask on some clichéd coming-of-age hooks; outside of his personal and familial turmoil, he doesn't face much of a defined threat. Roxxon is billed as the evil presence, but you won't see many villains at all – a huge change of pace from the first game. Rhino is the most pronounced, and he's the first one you see. Some others are teased, but they never materialize into anything other than cameos.

For a second act, Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales satisfies. Taking to the web-line and soaring across a wintery New York skyline is every bit as enthralling as it was before, and Miles develops into a fantastic hero. This follow-up doesn't have as much of a sinister punch, but it delivers some great plot twists and concludes with another eye-opening post-credits sequence that teases an exciting future for Insomniac's Spider-Man series.

» **Andrew Reiner**

9

PS5 • PS4

» **Concept**
A worthy follow-up that turns Miles Morales into a different (but equally powerful) Spider-Man

» **Graphics**
The visuals are simply stunning on both PS5 and PS4, with intricate suit details, fluid animations, and a gorgeous New York City behind almost every shot

» **Sound**
Nadji Jeter is fantastic as Miles Morales. All of the voice work is exceptional, as is the orchestral synth-hop soundtrack. Miles' theme gets stuck in your head

» **Playability**
Like wearing a well-worn Spider suit. It plays as well as the first game, with significant enhancements to stealth. Open-world activities are also not as repetitive as the last installment

» **Entertainment**
Not as long as the previous entry, but better streamlined. The Spider-Man action is superb, but the threat Miles faces isn't as interesting or potent

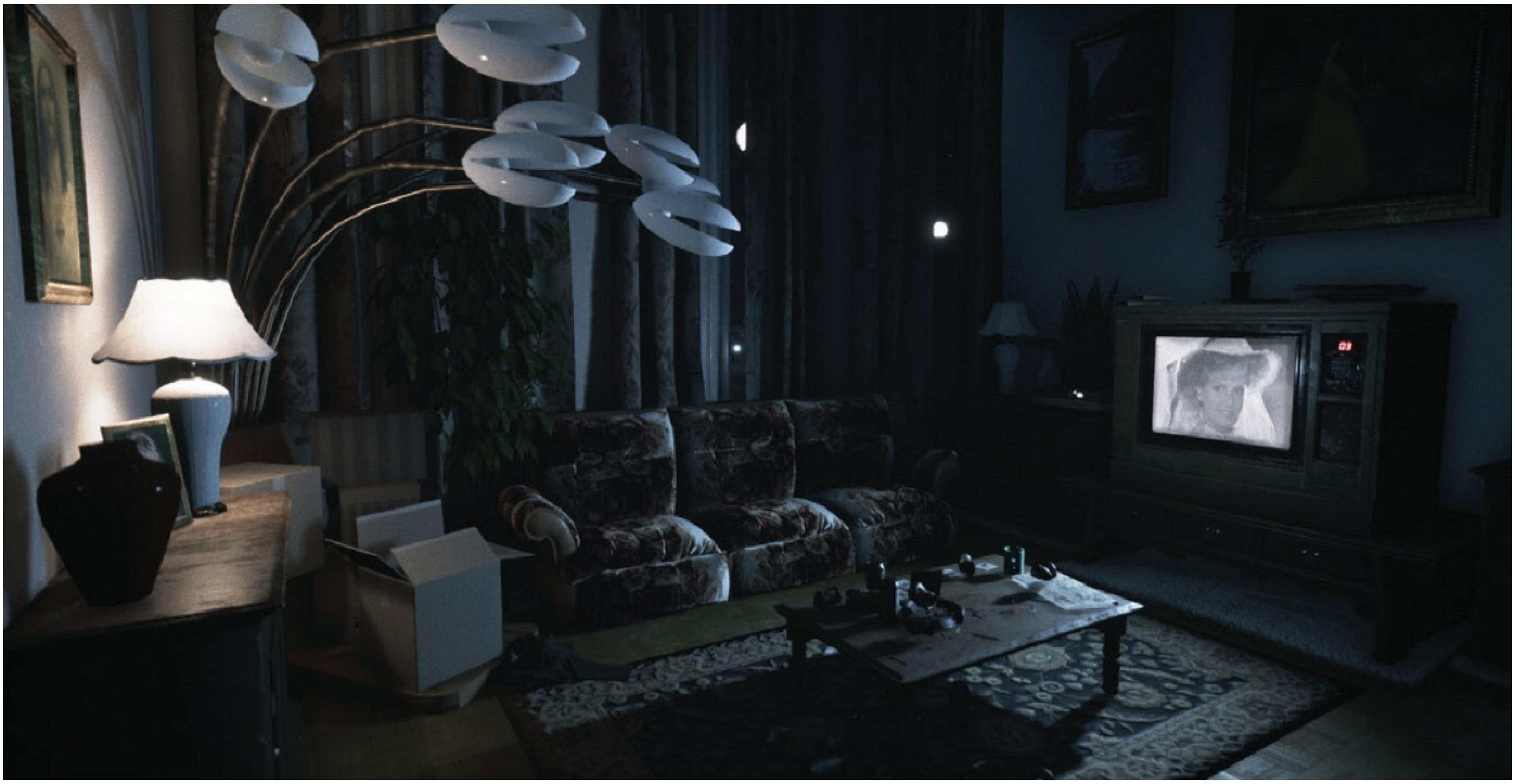
» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

The PlayStation 5 Difference

No load times. Beautiful ray tracing. The PlayStation 5 version of Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales is a technical juggernaut that continually impresses. It is the ideal way to play the game if you can. Feeling the Venom flow through the controller is quite cool. That's not to say the PlayStation 4 version is far behind, however. Marvel's Spider-Man from 2018 remains one of the generation's best-looking and playing games, and this sequel's performance is in lock-step with it.

Visage

Awesome apprehension



8.75

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** SadSquare Studio **Developer** SadSquare Studio **Release** October 30 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Discover the horrible secrets of a haunted house in sanity-sapping survival horror

» Graphics
Effective use of lighting and environments keep the tension sky high

» Sound
Screams, laughter, shuffling creaks and disturbing noises abound, setting an appropriately spooky stage

» Playability
Visage demands the ability to forgive its awful inventory management to enjoy a good scare

» Entertainment
The scariest game I've ever played, Visage admirably succeeds at building dread and capitalizing on that investment with compelling stories and chilling situations

» Replay Value
High

SadSquare Studio's Kickstarter-funded Visage starts with a bang and never lets go, ratcheting up tension and delicious dread. For fans of horror games, Visage is a nightmare that you can't miss; it's the scariest game I've ever played. Through effective use of a chilling atmosphere, rising apprehension, and just the right amount of shocks and surprises, Visage is the haunted house from Hell that scares your socks off. While the game suffers from poor inventory implementation and some of those indie "jank" bugs where you might get stuck in an environment or fall through the world, those annoyances can't shake the fact that Visage does terror incredibly well.

You begin the game in a house without a real sense of what is happening or any real goals. The hands-off approach toward discovering its many mysteries could be off-putting for those looking for guidance, but wandering the haunted halls without instruction is extremely effective as it builds up from flickering lights to shuffling spectral aberrations. It surprised me that after many hours of play I would still find excuses to explore well-lit segments of the house instead of heading down to the basement, even though I had already spent tons of time down there. A testament to the game's strength is that even a mundane laundry room or TV nook can induce trepidation. From a beguiling cat clock to an incessant radio that loves to turn itself on, there's enough disturbing flavor in the normal objects you find in the house. Is there something in the dark there with you? The answer is ... sometimes. And that question kept me on edge, always. Then, things get weird. The walls begin to ebb away, impossible designs and architecture appear, and new worlds open up.

Visage is a journey into the psychological realm as well as the real, and you may find yourself transported to lost treehouses, grim cemeteries, psychiatric facilities, or even a supermarket during your explorations in the house. By doing so, you learn the tragic and terrifying stories of others who have lived in the cursed location. Each "chapter" is tied to a character and has its own puzzles, and they are thematically incredible journeys through both the real and the surreal. A camera identifies hidden threats and secrets during the panic of a flash as the only light source; mirrors take you to the depths of the bizarre; or the eyes are always watching you as you scramble from misshapen bodies in the hospital hallways. Each arc tells a tale with satisfying and horrible endings that convey the world that you've stumbled upon. It's not a happy one, and every environment and chapter keeps you buzzed with equal parts adrenaline and fright as you open each door and solve each challenge.

Along the way, light sources and pills keep your sanity high. Consumables are ostensibly limited resources, and you're encouraged to be sparing with your sanity-restoring stock as the house messes with your mind by slamming doors, shutting off lights, or meddling with electronics. Let your sanity slide too far, and you're likely to get a visit from something much worse than some muffled footsteps or a fleeting face. Using items the way you want is often a huge pain when interacting with the environment. Attempting to set candles down, arrange your inventory, or do just anything with your items is often an exercise of battling the controls.

Visage creates a palpable playground for fans of horror to revel in, tapping into different flavors of fear to produce an unsettling experience. All too often, genre titles fall back on repetitive jump scares and shock value, but Visage lets the house burn into your brain and leaves you questioning every decision to open a door or descend a staircase. **» Daniel Tack**

The Pathless

A liberating and spirited adventure

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Giant Squid **Release** November 12 **Rating** E10+

The first shot in The Pathless is of a sprawling sea, a visual nod to developer Giant Squid's previous work on the ocean adventure game Abzû. That title was peaceful and serene, whereas The Pathless acts as a counterpoint, inviting you into a dark world consumed by fire and brimstone. Giant Squid handles the tonal shift well, creating a better game that embraces a true sense of discovery, while being every bit as gorgeous as its underwater predecessor.

This adventure into a dangerous land is seen through the eyes of a character known only as "The Hunter," a gifted archer who becomes the unlikely ally of a mystical eagle capable of lifting her high into the air. The Hunter is focused on one task: ridding the world of a curse created by a being known as Godslayer. For generations, Hunters have attempted this feat, but none have succeeded. You find these past Hunters' skeletal remains littered along the sprawling open-world areas, showing just how close they came – a great visual-narrative technique that guides you to more perilous places. The world's lore is uncovered through reading tomes, but Giant Squid also frames dramatic moments in beautifully animated cutscenes that scream of The Legend of Zelda's recent stylization. The Godslayer gets plenty of screen time to reveal why he's a formidable threat.

The Hunter's sole weapon is a bow, and despite what you may think, it is rarely used for combat. Its primary focus is locomotion. Using an ingenious lock-and-shoot system, every arrow that hits an environment-based talisman gives the Hunter a burst of speed. You don't have to worry about lining up these shots, the lock-on system does that, even if the talisman is off screen. You just have to time the shots, which ends up creating rhythmic gameplay. As arrows hit the mark, the Hunter bounds across the terrain in quick jolts. This style of movement is odd, but it's handled remarkably well in execution and ends up being a blast to use. It later evolves for flight purposes, allowing the Hunter to soar up the side of mountains. The tightening of the DualSense's adaptive triggers is cool, helping with timing just through the feel the controller gives off.

Holding true to The Pathless name, you won't find a bread-crumb trail to follow, a map to look at, or even a defined order to any of the objectives. Giant Squid created a freeing open-world design aided by clear visual lines that almost always hold a point of interest no matter what direction you face. As the terrain becomes more vertically challenging, the Hunter relies on a magical technique, almost like a submarine's sonar, which illuminates something of note in a red hue for a second. The exploration is enthralling, and I never once felt like I was lost or in need of some kind of assistance. I just ran to areas that looked important and my assumption was almost always right.

Most of the notable places are ancient ruins or dilapidated structures that hold an item called the Lightstone, which the Hunter must return to towers to cleanse the area of the curse. The Lightstones are always locked away behind an energy field. To free them, the Hunter must use the bow to solve environmental puzzles, sometimes shooting arrows through flames at specific angles to ignite pyres, and other times lining up a trick shot to thread three rings at once. These puzzles are well thought-out; a few stumped me for a bit, but their diminutive size doesn't overwhelm and there are only so many approaches you can try. In general, the puzzles are fun to solve and a nice change of pace, since the game largely hangs its hat on environmental navigation. My biggest complaint about The Pathless is the repetitive structure of each world. Find the Lightstones. Light the towers. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

The Hunter is often airborne, gliding with her eagle over vast spaces, allowing the player to soak in the beauty of the world. Periodically, though, an angry beast whips across the terrain, engulfing it in flames. When this happens, the player simply must sneak by it. These stealth sequences are overused, but are mercifully easy. When all of the towers in an area are lit, this foe transforms into a formidable boss, showcasing how intense and challenging The Pathless can be.

These big fights begin with a chase sequence, where the Hunter leaps over fire, glides past fireballs, and uses talismans to keep up and hopefully get close enough to land a shot on one of the beast's weak spots. The Hunter then confronts it in an arena battle that requires her to time her jumps and roll-dodge area blasts. Each of the handful of worlds' bosses are distinct and nicely designed. I loved taking them all on.

The Pathless is a wonderfully different game that makes you feel like you have ownership over the entire experience and are not being led along by a pre-scripted playbook. It's one of those adventures that will stick with you long after you play it. » **Andrew Reiner**

8

PS5 • PS4 • PC • iOS

» **Concept**
Open-world exploration and puzzle-solving unite in this unique and beautiful adventure

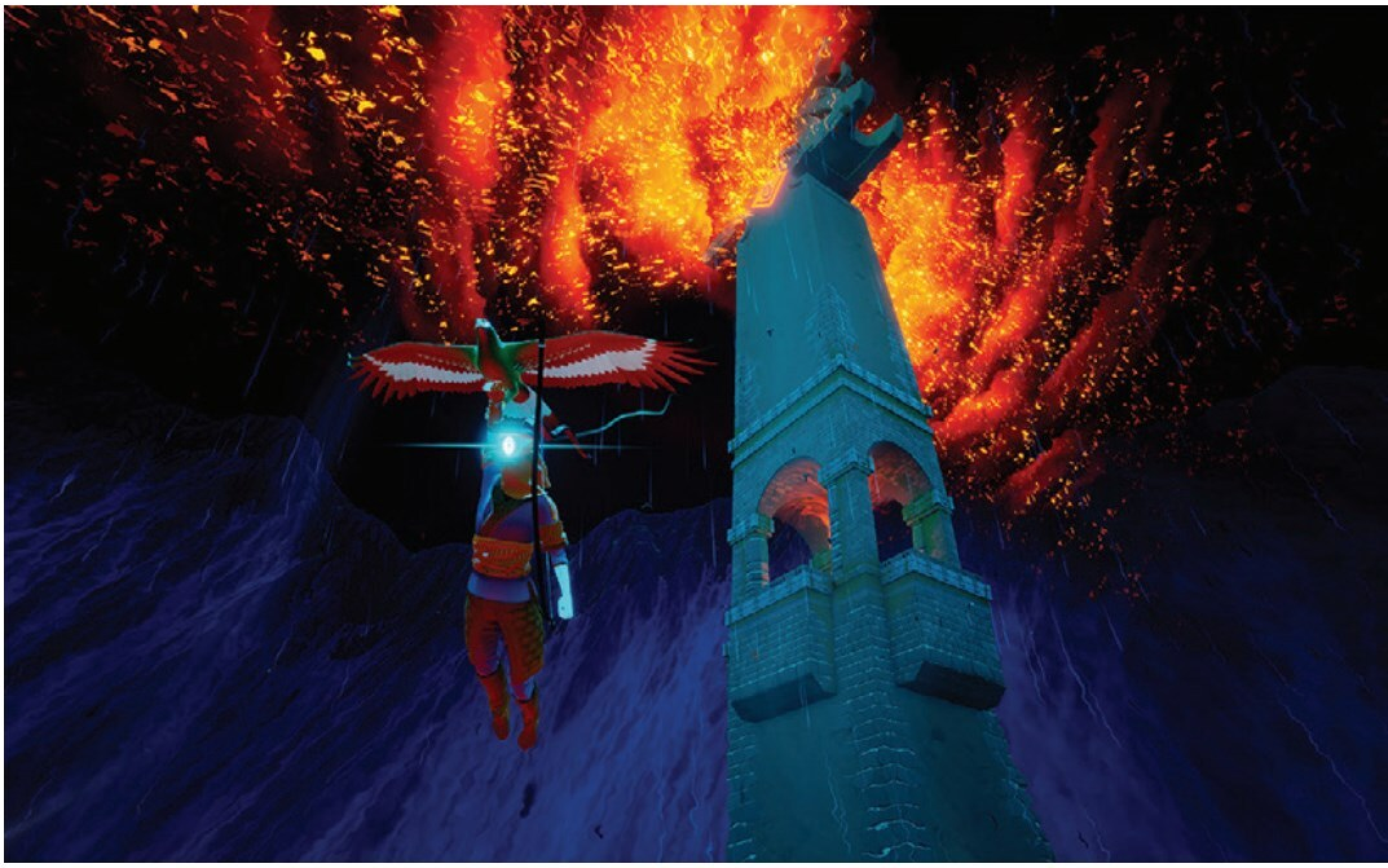
» **Graphics**
It looks like a cartoon come to life, with smooth animations and colors that pop

» **Sound**
One of the best soundtracks of the year that shifts from menacing orchestration to a lone fiddle

» **Playability**
The freedom of exploration is liberating, the controls are easy to pick up and master, and the puzzles are nicely designed

» **Entertainment**
Clocking in at roughly seven hours, don't be surprised if you complete it in one or two sessions. It's a hard game to put down

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



Assassin's Creed Valhalla

A saga worthy of song

9.25

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 331

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal
Release November 10 (Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC), November 12 (PS5) **Rating** M

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Concept
Become a Viking hero who establishes a home for the Raven Clan by building alliances and waging wars in unfriendly lands

» Graphics
The world is beautiful in a different way from previous installments, and the action looks great apart from occasional performance issues (even on next-gen hardware) and other technical glitches

» Sound
Good voice performances from both versions of Eivor (who can be male or female), as well as excellent music and sound effects that sell the mayhem of battle

» Playability
A nice array of accessibility options, difficulty settings, and other features let you customize the gameplay experience

» Entertainment
Assassin's Creed Valhalla is full of interesting stories and fun interlocking systems, making it an engrossing world you can easily get lost in

» Replay Value
Moderately high

The Assassin's Creed franchise draws people in for many reasons. Over the years, it has provided stealth-focused infiltration, stylish encounters, high-seas adventures, and other elements – but not always in equal measure. Each installment hits different sweet spots for different players with varying degrees of success, but for the first time in the series, the balance feels perfect in Assassin's Creed Valhalla. With its engaging combination of combat, open-world exploration, crafted story content, and settlement management, this Viking saga is an epic with a little something for everyone.

Valhalla embodies a fascinating evolution for Assassin's Creed, but you don't need any familiarity with the franchise to appreciate it. Eivor of the Raven Clan attempts to forge alliances in the hostile territory of Anglo-Saxon England. These efforts to create a new home bring together a variety of compelling loops that capture the adventurous Viking spirit; you can hunt legendary animals, track down new pieces of gear, or ride your longship down the riverways. This open-world content is deliberate and purposeful, with little padding. The special world events called "mysteries" are the best example of this approach, which are excellent authored scenarios that present specific challenges or simply tell funny stories. Every time I left the clan's settlement of Ravensthorpe, I had to choose between multiple tempting paths. This wealth of enticing options made me feel like a warrior at a feast with more delicious mead and meat than any one person could ever consume.

Brutal combat is a hallmark of the Viking legend, and it's an area where Valhalla builds upon the solid foundation of its predecessors. Fights feel like chaotic melee brawls rather than elegant dances of death; this can make some encounters feel too unfocused, but they also have a grounded sensation, with lots of clanging metal and splintering wood. A huge skill tree and an array of abilities give you plenty of freedom with how you build your character; Eivor can easily take on a crowd of foes, and the variety of different enemy types keeps you thinking just enough to keep the fray from devolving into button-mashing. The one-on-one boss fights are less consistent, sometimes straining the mechanics beyond what they can comfortably accomplish.

Eivor's exploits are all fun individually, but I'm most impressed by how they all interact harmoniously. Your accomplishments in the world feed back into your settlement, and managing Ravensthorpe is one of Valhalla's highlights. It is deeper than the base-building in previous installments, and the structures you build have major effects. Building a barracks allows you to create a Viking lieutenant you can share with your friends, while erecting a home for the seer lets Eivor delve into strange visions. Most new facilities come with some additional feature or quest, and I enjoyed seeing my humble collection of huts gradually grow into a thriving town.

Valhalla's narrative is smartly broken up into location-based arcs as Eivor attempts to win friends in different regions. This provides the satisfaction of completing many separate stories, all while working toward your larger goal of prosperity for the Raven Clan. Some larger threads (which I won't ruin here) connect these tales, and I like how they are standalone sequences with their own payoffs. Just working through these arcs of the campaign is no small task; I played for over 70 hours, and that's without taking a completionist approach to exploration.

The content and design of Valhalla are the best the series has seen in years, but the technical frustrations are disappointingly familiar. I encountered several companion A.I. bugs, quest glitches, and other sorts of graphical and audio weirdness. These problems may be jarring and inconvenient, but none of them are severe enough to significantly dampen my enjoyment; the failures are light when weighed against the heft of the game's successes.

Assassin's Creed Valhalla creates a rewarding and immersive experience at every turn, whether you're pursuing the main narrative or hunting down treasure. I'm sure Valhalla is not the perfect Assassin's Creed game for all players, but it is certainly my new favorite entry. **» Joe Juba**

The Next-Gen Edge

My time playing Assassin's Creed Valhalla for review was spent exclusively on Xbox Series X. The graphics look great, and the faster loading times should be an immediate relief to anyone who has played an Assassin's Creed game in the last seven years. However, I also hit occasional framerate drops and persistent screen tearing. These technical trade-offs prevent Valhalla from being a standard-bearer for the next generation of hardware, though aspects of its performance remain impressive.

Watch Dogs: Legion

A successful team-building exercise

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Toronto
Release October 29 (PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC), November 10 (Xbox Series X/S), November 12 (PS5) **Rating** M

9

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Stadia

» **Concept**
Take down an oppressive regime by recruiting an army of hackers across near-future London

» **Graphics**
Holographic propaganda, omnipresent drones, and neon lights sell the city's beauty and oppressive atmosphere

» **Sound**
Hearing your crew spout the same voice samples gets old, but strong main character performances carry the slack. The licensed soundtrack rocks, too

» **Playability**
Gameplay promotes flexibility and creativity while also rewarding the use of ideal agent types

» **Entertainment**
Legion offers a refreshing and fun change-up to the Watch Dogs formula that succeeds in letting players forge their own path like never before

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

In near-future London, DedSec is no more. Framed for a terrorist attack, the hacktivist group from previous Watch Dogs games has been purged, and the city has morphed into an authoritarian state policed by Albion, an evil mercenary company. However, the subjugated citizens carry the spark of resistance; it's up to you to fan it into a wildfire of rebellion. Instead of putting you in control of a single protagonist, Watch Dogs: Legion gives you thousands of disgruntled Londoners, providing the freedom and flexibility to fight like never before. Despite a few bad apples, they don't spoil what's ultimately an entertaining fight for freedom.

Your objective is to retake London from its enemy kingpins. You explore and reclaim boroughs through a variety of activities, including sabotage, evidence gathering, and promoting your own propaganda. Where Watch Dogs: Legion sets itself apart from many open-world games is its city full of potential heroes.

Amassing your army of agents is a fulfilling and strategic endeavor. Anyone can be recruited, and I felt like a kid in a candy store scanning Londoners thanks to the cool combinations of skills each can bring. For example, one of my favorite members was a futuristic beekeeper who commanded swarms of robotic hornets. Techies hack devices faster, investors rake in more money, protesters can rally bystanders to fight, and spies bring gadgets and combat expertise. It's delightfully silly to command a group resembling a tech-savvy Village People, and the game doesn't take itself too seriously, making it fun to revel in the absurdity. I grew to cherish certain team members for their skillsets and zaniness (especially because I played with the optional permadeath turned on).

Most of the side content consists of satisfying the needs of potential recruits. They're decently fun tasks but start repeating themselves too soon. Borough uprisings offer better diversions thanks to their variety and the exciting final missions each neighborhood presents. Lesser activities like package deliveries and graffiti tagging provide lighter thrills, but they at least give an excuse to tour Legion's beautiful, high-tech take on London.

The main story missions are much more gratifying. Four genuinely despicable villains provide plenty of motivation to free London of their tyranny, and the missions focused on taking them down regularly surprised me with their creativity. One of the best involves a surprisingly heartbreaking trek through the disturbing home of a scientist obsessed with digitizing the human mind.

Smart level design forces players to consider the right person for the job while also allowing multiple approaches. Strutting into an Albion stronghold disguised as an employee is just as viable as sending combat drones to mow down threats ahead of time. I always had fun surveying a situation and deciding which combination of tools to employ. To that end, the game makes excellent use of its gadgets, like drones, cameras, and turrets. I especially like the spiderbots – arachnid-like drones that provide a satisfying way to circumvent heavily guarded areas. I also enjoyed the stealthy platforming segments dedicated to them.

Commanding various robots is also fun in combat and for puzzle-solving. Riding atop large cargo drones like Spider-Man's Green Goblin is particularly awesome. Not only can soaring overhead bypass a lot of obstacles, but raining hell from above is supremely entertaining. I love how Legion allows players to combine their tools for creative improvisation. I got a kick from attaching spider turrets atop cars or cargo drones to create mobile murder machines. Enemy A.I. can be boneheaded at times, but the gameplay is a blast that gets better with every upgrade and ability unlocked.

While Watch Dogs: Legion mostly sells the fantasy of a wholly unique populous, hearing the same handful of voice samples or viewing similar character portraits with slight variations sullies that vision a bit. Another small but regular annoyance comes in the load time while switching agents (at least on current-gen hardware). While not egregiously long, it's just enough of a delay to break your stride.

Legion feels like the realization of the hacker fantasy the first Watch Dogs tried to capture. Between the fun team-building, fantastic mission design, strong narrative, and gorgeous world, everything comes together in a largely entertaining and cohesive package. Whether you're controlling a trained super spy or a gassy grandmother, Watch Dogs: Legion is a ton of fun.

» **Marcus Stewart**

Astro's Playroom

A welcome celebration

8

Style 1-Player Action/Platformer **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** SIE Japan Studio **Release** November 12 **Rating** E10+

PS5

» Concept
A lighthearted platformer that provides fun and variety while also showing off the technology behind the PlayStation 5's DualSense controller

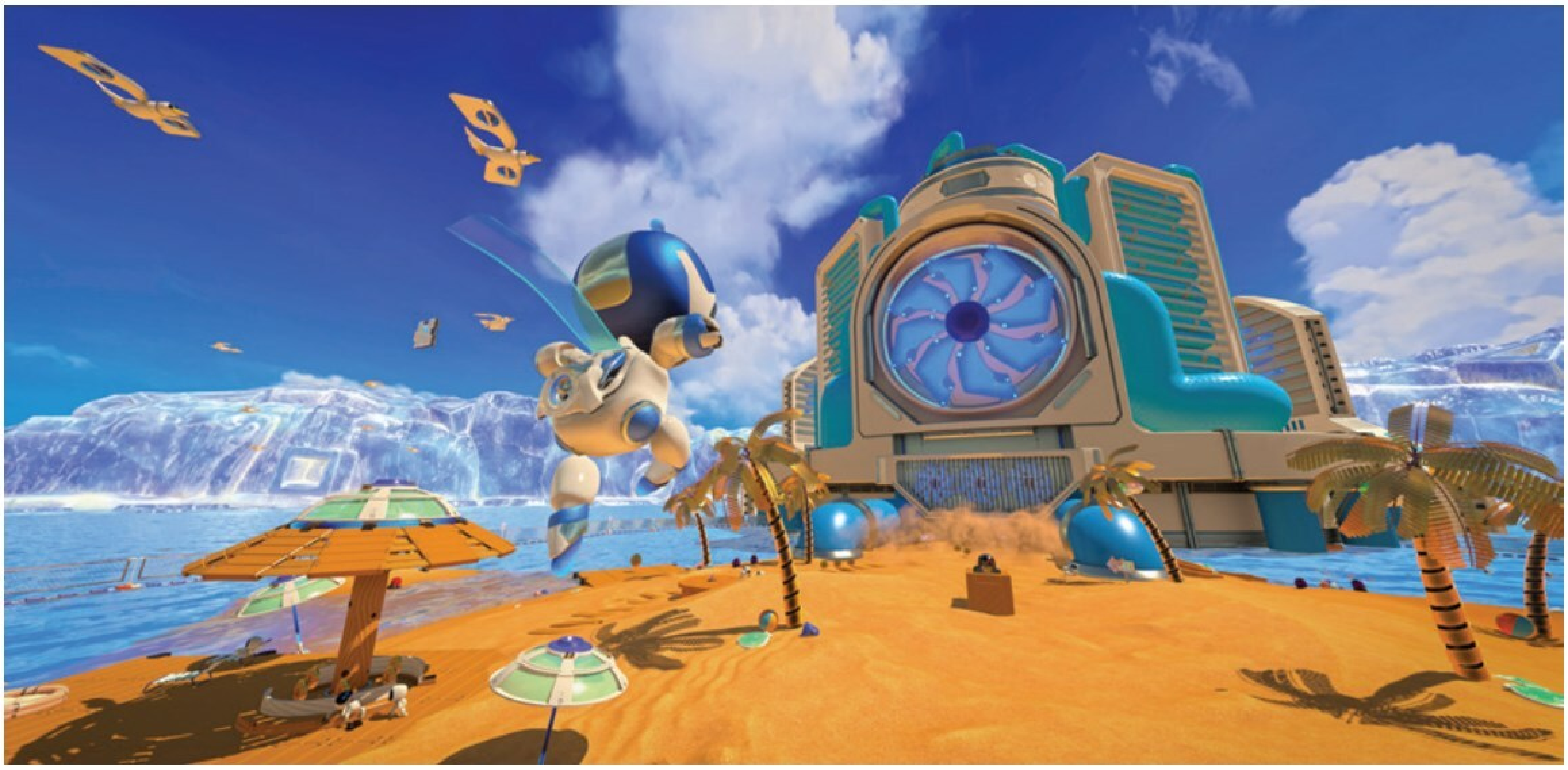
» Graphics
Colorful environments, cute characters, and lots of hidden Easter eggs keep your eyes intently focused on the action

» Sound
Adorable robot sounds (some of which come out of the controller's speaker) do the job, but the real audio star is the wonderfully catchy soundtrack

» Playability
The basic platforming controls feel responsive and polished. A wide array of different scenarios demonstrate what the PS5's controller can do, including the new rumble capabilities and adaptive triggers

» Entertainment
Astro's Playroom isn't just an introduction to the PS5. It is a charming and enjoyable game, even if it isn't trying to redefine the boundaries of the platforming genre

» Replay Value
Moderate



Astro's Playroom comes pre-installed on every PlayStation 5, so when you first start it up, you may assume it's a tutorial designed to introduce you to the system's capabilities. That assumption is not correct. Yes, the game is a great showpiece for the PS5's DualSense controller, applying its haptic feedback, adaptive triggers, and motion-sensing technology to a variety of inventive situations. But Astro's Playroom is much more than a tutorial; it's a joyful and polished platformer that ushers in a new generation of PlayStation hardware with a big smile.

Astro is a cute little robot that runs, hops, and flies across colorful worlds – each based on different components of the PS5. You splash around in the cooling unit, soar through the SSD, and explore the GPU forest. Like other mascot platformers, you also need to collect things along the way, some of which are floating in plain sight while others require some minor effort to obtain. In terms of basic structure and mechanics, Astro's Playroom is not surprising; it adheres closely to a comfortable formula. But that familiarity doesn't drag the experience down, because the DualSense controller adds novelty in fun and surprising ways.

Every function and feature of the controller gets a little time in the spotlight. Pervasive and distinct rumble effects steal the show, from the tiny sensation of Astro's footsteps to thundering moments like an Indiana Jones-style boulder chase. The triggers offer resistance as you charge your jumps in a frog suit or operate the levers on a toy machine. Sliding your finger across the touchpad lets you direct your movement as you roll around in a ball. The list goes on, and while some mechanics feel like gimmicks (steering with motion controls will never be fun), the majority of them are cool. Even more than that, they make a substantial difference in your connection to the action, conveying an amazing tactile sense of the world.

But as I said, Astro's Playroom isn't just a shallow excuse to show off the DualSense. Even without the tech behind it, it's an enjoyable platformer with a satisfying mix of variety and charm, and all the levels set themselves apart in unique ways. Some have an open-world playground feel, where you search every corner for hidden areas and collectibles. Light combat against a small selection of enemies keeps you from having totally free rein, but these levels are more about exploration than aggression. I had fun hunting down the treasures and interacting with the environment, though everything is attainable and obvious enough that I hesitate to call them "puzzles."

Other stages are linear platforming challenges that use Astro's laser-powered hover-jump. These portions are also pretty forgiving, with generous checkpoints and obstacles that provide just enough resistance to make you pause a moment, but not so much that you get stuck. You also find various suits and vehicles in sections that have you scaling walls or navigating deep space; these are the parts that feel the most gimmicky and unreliable, but even so, they are rarely long enough to cause any real frustration. Plus, it's hard to get too mad with the game's infectiously upbeat soundtrack going in the background.

Even though Astro's Playroom is relatively simple, it kept me entertained for about five hours with its array of challenges and entertaining Easter eggs. During Astro's jaunt through the guts of the PS5, you run across all sorts of PlayStation references and memorabilia. From seeing bot versions of iconic characters (like Kratos and Solid Snake) to gathering old peripherals and consoles, the journey is full of "I recognize that!" flashes that punctuate the lighthearted and approachable gameplay.

At its best, Astro's Playroom recaptures the magic of my favorite Lego video games – except the license on display is the PlayStation brand instead of something like Star Wars or Marvel. The cameos are plentiful and amusing, with franchises that go beyond the first-party catalogue, along with some surprisingly deep cuts that made me feel very old. But in the midst of all that history, Astro feels like an adorably fresh face; I'm glad to see the character break out of the confines of VR and reach out to a broader audience. Astro's Playroom may not be the deepest or most ambitious game on PS5, but its humor and playfulness are just delightful. **» Joe Juba**

Yakuza: Like A Dragon

A new hero takes his turn

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 331

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio
Release November 10 (Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC), March 2, 2021 (PS5) **Rating** M

Yakuza 6 marked the end of protagonist Kazuma Kiryu's journey, leaving us with a single question: "What now?" For years, players had explored Japan with Kiryu, becoming attached to the character as well as the template that his games inhabited. Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio could have simply dropped a new face in Kamurocho and called it a day, but that's not what happened. In Yakuza: Like a Dragon, the studio raised eyebrows by scrapping the traditional arcade-brawler combat and replacing it with turn-based RPG-inspired battles. And while there is a new face to the action, he's accompanied throughout his adventure in Yokohama with a rotating troupe of like-minded heroes. It's a pivot that could have ended in disaster. Fortunately, Like a Dragon's bold gamble pays off, leading to one of the best entries to date.

Ichiban Kasuga has some big slip-on loafers to fill. Kiryu's stoicism and determination were a natural fit for the criminal underworld he orbited, but his charm and willingness to help people with their problems won audiences over. Kasuga is no Kiryu, and that's kind of the point. This new hero is impulsive, hotheaded, and a bit of a goofball. At the beginning of his adventure, Kasuga shares his enthusiasm for the Dragon Quest series with an underling. He sees himself as a hero, even if his abilities don't initially line up with his aspirations. Kasuga's willingness to help is weaponized against him, leading to him taking the fall (and an 18-year prison sentence) for a murder he didn't commit.

We don't know much about Kasuga at first, which ends up being one of the most refreshing things that Like a Dragon offers. Without the weight of half a dozen or so games and their associated histories on his shoulders, Kasuga is a blank slate for this new Yokohama adventure. Kasuga certainly has goals and motivations – figuring out why his father figure in the Tojo Clan betrayed him is chief among them – but the fact that he's such a small figure in this world creates an exhilarating feeling of freedom. This new hero doesn't have established relationships in this new town, so the first few hours are filled with simple tasks like finding work. What could be a boring slog cleverly leans into the RPG systems that underpin the entire experience.

I was a little put off by the turn-based combat at first, but I quickly warmed up to it. Returning players will notice some familiar animations, including some bike-swinging action when characters come across those props in the field. Well-timed button presses grant additional damage or mitigate enemy attacks, which helped me stay engaged during battles. As Kasuga establishes himself in the town, other characters join in on the action. This allows for a lot more depth and specialization. I enjoyed having a couple of bruisers soften up my targets while the others focused on debuffing enemies or providing heals when needed. I especially loved the Poundmates, which are essentially Like a Dragon's version of summons. These are supremely stupid, and they are often rewards for engaging in the myriad substories. I won't spoil too much, but I will say that having a group of low-level yakuza thugs attacked by crawfish is one of the less bizarre options available.

There is a large criminal conspiracy at play here – it's a Yakuza game, after all – but it doesn't feel as needlessly complicated as some of the intrigue has been in the other entries. Keeping track of the important figures isn't quite as overwhelming, most likely because Kasuga isn't privy to a lot of what's going on. I loved the way the story gradually comes to light, too. Kasuga and his friends learn much about Yokohama's criminal underworld by working various jobs throughout the city; he's learning about the town and its people at the same time we are, which is a refreshing approach

It wouldn't be a Yakuza game without an abundance of side activities, and Like a Dragon delivers here, too. If you're not having fun with the current task at hand or want a break from the story, several lengthy side activities or pursuits are around to occupy your time. Yokohama is home to several great diversions, including a Mario Kart-like Dragon Karting series, complete with racing rivals, powerups, and tiered tournaments. I spent much of my time in the oddly engaging management sim, where you hire people to run a variety of different businesses to increase profits, and then take on investors in board-room battles.

Like a Dragon is a departure from the games that came before it, but I found those changes to be revitalizing. As much as I enjoyed the Yakuza formula, it was definitely a formula. Like a Dragon has enough familiar elements to make it feel like, at its heart, it's a Yakuza game. All the while, I fully appreciate how much of a new identity this entry is establishing. Here's hoping this is the first step in yet another great journey for the series. » **Jeff Cork**

9.25

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Shake up the Yakuza formula by introducing a new protagonist, moving the action to Yokohama, and – most notably – shifting from traditional brawling action to turn-based RPG-style combat

» Graphics
Yokohama is a vast and dazzling place to explore, with plenty of visual details to soak in. Some of its less-prominent residents tend to look a little strange, but the major players look great

» Sound
Battles are juiced by an energetic soundtrack, which also adds dramatic tension and intrigue when needed. Voice acting continues to impress, whether you're playing in English or Japanese

» Playability
You do everything from beating up low-level thugs to running a successful business empire during your time with Like a Dragon, and the controls are uniformly up to the challenge. Figuring out some of the systems can be tricky at first, but persistence pays off

» Entertainment
It's a new direction for the series, but Like a Dragon captures the essence of what came before while setting out on its own journey

» Replay Value
Moderately high

FIFA 21

Still kicking

7.75

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver
Release October 9 (PS4, Xbox One, PC), December 4 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S) **Rating** E

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Keep track of your favorite professional club with small quality-of-life changes or lead your own amateur street-football team in a new story-mode experience

» Graphics
The faces and animations look great, but player models are stiff and robotic during pre- and post-game cinematics

» Sound
Rapturous chants are a ceaseless reminder that you're playing the most popular sport in the world

» Playability
Skill dribbles are a challenge to execute, but when you outplay a goalkeeper to make a flashy score, you know you're probably doing the right thing

» Entertainment
The Volta and Career modes are fun and engrossing for a time, but they don't add much substance for players familiar with last year's installment

» Replay Value
Moderately high

For newcomers to the FIFA series, sprinting down the pitch in FIFA 21 and converting tight through-passes or high-arching lobs into game-winning scores is invigorating. Crowds go wild, the camera shakes to match the roaring intensity, and Paulo Dybala performs a backflip as his teammates whoop in excitement. Moments like this are fun and exhilarating, and you don't need to follow the long-running series' year-to-year adjustments to appreciate them – though seasoned veterans may be disappointed by the minor strides forward.

Instead of implementing revolutionary changes, EA Vancouver uses FIFA 21 as an opportunity to refine moment-to-moment gameplay. Keeping the ball feels intuitive, especially when you fake out aggressive defenders with skill moves like the bridge dribble or ball-roll fake turns. Moreover, setting up fluid passes between multiple players with the flick of the right stick makes movement approachable for gamers of all skill levels. As a whole, the gameplay feels streamlined and entertaining – but the package is about more than the on-pitch action.

FIFA 21's atmosphere and presentation are stellar. I always enjoyed seeing jerseys crease and crinkle at slight movements, or watching players flex their muscles after driving the ball into the opponent's net. The animations are smooth and don't have many collision issues. Nevertheless, I noticed some occasions where a celebrating scorer would slam into a net or run through a divider into the stands. These moments are immersion-breaking, but don't occur often enough to drag the game down.

FIFA 21 still has an array of classic modes. Ultimate Team lives up to its reputation for fierce competition, but skill-level disparities feel unfair since microtransactions lead to faster progression and better team builds. You have multiple offline and online options to earn Ultimate Team coins – run with friends and compete in Division Rivals and Squad Battles or dive into uniquely themed event playlists by yourself – but don't expect to earn a large sum of rewards. Laborious grinding is an integral mechanic of Ultimate Team. Other multiplayer modes are chaotic fun, like 11v11 Pro Clubs, but returning players will find that it's a carbon copy of last year's version.

Career mode makes it easy to manage your club's development. You can set up group training sessions before big matches to increase your team's sharpness – a new attribute that affects the likelihood of executing game-changing drives or making pivotal defensive stops. A clean interface also allows you to keep tabs on your team's morale and fitness, so you can fine-tune your plans to prioritize high- and low-tier players. I enjoyed transforming my substitute players into all-stars, and the challenging A.I. made these off-the-pitch game plans more rewarding. If the heavy management and logistics of career mode are too monotonous, you can dive right into the action with pre-made tournaments including the UEFA Champions League and the Women's International Cup.

My favorite mode is Volta, with small-scale matches (either 3v3, 4v4, or 5v5) similar to what I imagine organized street football would look like. You start by creating an avatar, customizing your squadmates' appearances, and deciding on a team logo/name. Volta's quick-play matches take you around the world to wonderfully realized locations – Rio de Janeiro's favela-themed map is a standout – and are the fastest way to earn modest portions of skill points and currency which can be exchanged for new abilities and clothes, respectively. Even though Volta's wardrobe is extensive, it hosts an utterly lackluster collection of gear that ranges from generic jerseys to monochromatic sneakers. On the other hand, purchasing ability nodes on your avatar's skill tree customizes the gameplay experience in satisfying ways. Do you prefer to make clutch passes and pad your assists or would you rather be a relentless scorer? Additionally, players from other Volta teams can be recruited, but if you want to play alongside famous footballers like cover athlete Kylian Mbappé, you have to grind against the A.I. and clear a list of monotonous challenges.

FIFA 21's brief single-player story, The Debut, pits you against a number of amateur Volta teams in order to secure a spot in the Dubai Streets and Icons Championship. The Debut's narrative and characters are forgettable, but it serves as a great way to earn a substantial amount of skill points and currency. Volta emerges as a nice break from the structure of professional football, but when you factor in the miniscule pitch and the lack of footballers on the field at any given time, it becomes evident that the game mode prioritizes one playstyle: speedy aggression. Because of this, matches teeter between being a breeze or downright punishing.

The graphics and gameplay of FIFA 21 deliver fun and functional football, but its ambitions don't extend far beyond that. Over time, the grinding leads to burnout and boredom, and the gear and rewards you're working so hard to obtain are rarely satisfying enough to make the chase worthwhile. Nailing the fundamentals is important, but it takes more than that to be a real winner. » **Jay Guisao**

MARQUINHOS
5
1&1

Bugsnax

Creative nonsense

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Young Horses **Developer** Young Horses **Release** November 12 **Rating** E10+

By any measure, Bugsnax is a silly game. You inhabit a world of *Sesame Street*-like monsters and visit an island filled with bugs shaped like snacks – hot dogs, soda cans, and more. The googly eyed inhabitants inexplicably desire to eat these bugsnax, which transform their limbs into the objects they've devoured. This process is called "snakification," and for some reason, it delights rather than terrifies everyone. You must bring the scattered townsfolk back together, usually by capturing particular creatures and feeding them to individuals, even as absurd melodramas play out between the characters. It is as strange as it sounds.

While that makes for an unusual wrapper, Bugsnax is really a puzzle-solving adventure game. You wander several relatively small open areas from a first-person perspective, scanning and bagging the little walking morsels by luring, trapping, or tricking them. Along the way, you get to know several offbeat island dwellers and unravel a mystery about the settlement's missing founder.

The lighthearted but deeply strange premise isn't always enough to keep the story engaging, and there's a lot of borderline-nonsensical spoken dialogue as you meet and problem-solve for the eccentric cast. When the storytelling works, it's because everything is communicated through such an earnest and wholesome delivery. All the flawed characters are lonely, and themes around the value of community and relationships make for a heartfelt message. Whether it's the guy who tries to understand if his longtime roommate is really his boyfriend or not, or the husband and wife who love each other despite being completely different, everyone is struggling to connect. And also, struggling to make puns. So many puns.

To reunite everyone, you have to hunt down and capture the adorable and tasty bugsnax. The several dozen varieties across the island each have different behaviors to decipher, which is initially a compelling hook. The puzzles start out extremely simple and ramp up to be moderately challenging by the end. However, the challenge often comes through convoluted action and tool combinations that don't always make a lot of sense. Sometimes, I stumbled onto a solution through trial and error, or found the correct answer, but failed because of the finicky way the hunting tools worked. From swinging nets to launching springboards, it can be fun to put together a multi-step plan to lure the burning-hot stew creature to the freezing popsicle insect that will cool it down enough to pick up, but more often than not, the process just feels tedious.

The quest structure doesn't help, as the absurd premise (I need to eat that bug!) leads to increasingly inane tasks prescribed by the helpless island denizens. With each passing quest, I felt less like a brave island explorer, and more like one of those grocery-delivery people who hurriedly gathers apples at the store before rushing out to hand them over to impatient customers waiting at home. Even so, I appreciate that there's a wide selection of available quests to uncover. You can mainline the core campaign in a few hours, but if you fall in love with these little bugsnax, a number of side quests offer more opportunities for digging back in.

Between character narratives, multiple active questlines, and a whole taxonomy of bugsnax, you have a lot to keep track of. I was pleased to find a smartly organized set of collections and tracking options in the pause menu; from scan data to details on the characters and locations uncovered, it helps the game feel cohesive and manageable.

Playing on PS5, I was also impressed with the early implementation of the built-in hint system. Through both written and video guides, players can glean puzzle solutions with the touch of a few buttons, rather than requiring that you look up an answer online. It's a small but meaningful addition in a game like this, especially knowing that the game might be targeting some less experienced users who may value some help on more obtuse or challenging creature captures.

As a game, Bugsnax seems delighted by its own ridiculous premise, and hopes its players climb onboard as well. I appreciate its genuine and childlike themes, but much of the humor never really lands, and some late-game story threads around depression and abandonment are especially incongruous. With quests and puzzles that feel less like discoveries and more like errands, I'm left applauding a particularly entertaining idea, but one that never coalesces into a great time.
» **Matt Miller**

7

PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Explore a mysterious island and reunite its scattered townspeople by catching bugs shaped like snacks, then feeding them to the inhabitants

» **Graphics**
Bright and inviting colors fill the characters and environments, but this is not a new-gen powerhouse in terms of visuals

» **Sound**
Innocuous music bounces along with the adventure, while the townspeople are voiced with gusto

» **Playability**
Some of the bug-catching tools in your arsenal are finicky, adding frustration to some otherwise light puzzle solving

» **Entertainment**
Equal parts bizarre and good-hearted, Bugsnax is a breezy sequence of encounters and puzzles, but the continual errand structure of quests starts to feel like a chore

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Pikmin 3 Deluxe

Sharing the load together

9

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Strategy **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** October 30 **Rating** E10+

Switch

» Concept
Revisit the 2013 Wii U action/strategy title, adding campaign co-op and a series of new follow-up missions

» Graphics
The delightful blend of realistic environments and objects with cartoonish characters is great, whether you're playing on your TV or in handheld mode

» Sound
The pleasant tunes mostly hang around in the background, becoming more urgent when enemies are close by. The squeals of dying Pikmin haven't lost their power to make me feel horrible

» Playability
Losing the Wii U's dedicated screen makes it less convenient to manage multiple characters playing solo, but the ability to bring another player along for the ride is a worthy tradeoff

» Entertainment
Pikmin 3's blend of strategic action and exploration is as captivating as ever, whether this is your maiden voyage or a return flight

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Words like "cute," "adorable," and "tiny" are conversational touchstones when it comes to Pikmin, but I offer an alternative: "Overwhelming." The entire point of the series comes down to that concept.

You defeat enemies by commanding swarms of the titular creatures who pummel giant bugs and other pests with their tiny fists until the foes are vanquished. You face multiple (and often competing) tasks, which must be prioritized and managed as the daylight relentlessly fades. Pikmin 3 added another juggling element when it first released on Wii U in 2013, giving players alternating control of three different diminutive astronauts. Leave one idle, and you're wasting precious time and resources. Moving between all of these things competing for your attention can make you feel like every plate is just a few spins away from crashing to the floor – but it's a good kind of overwhelming, to be clear. Pikmin 3 Deluxe doesn't overhaul objectives or streamline tasks, but it provides the opportunity to add a co-pilot along for the campaign, which lets you focus more on coordination and less on fussy micromanagement.

If you didn't play the original version, Pikmin 3 Deluxe is largely the same game when you tackle it solo. As a member of an alien crew, you're responsible for saving your home planet by scouring the Earth-like planet PNF-404 for fruit and other edibles. Thanks to the group's diminutive size, an orange provides a bounty of juice that can sustain the trio for days. They're so small, however, that moving that kind of prize back to their ship would be an impossible task, even if all three of them pitched in. That's where the Pikmin come in. These friendly critters are happy to carry objects around, uncover shortcuts across the levels, and fight comparatively gargantuan beasts on your behalf.

Pikmin are split across a variety of colors, with each type providing special abilities. Pink ones can fly across streams and ponds, while blue ones can dive right in. Try that with one of the other varieties, such as the shockproof yellow ones, and you end up with a team of drowning victims. Fortunately, their numbers can be replaced by converting the corpses of defeated foes into new Pikmin seeds. It's pretty grim stuff if you take the time to consider what's happening, so the less you think about it, the better. You're introduced to new types as you progress through the campaign, and you're incentivized to revisit the handful of maps with Pikmin who can get you through previously impassible barriers.

The campaign was a lot of fun in its original form, thanks in no small measure to its frantic nature. Once you reunite your crew, successfully maneuvering through the day requires a fair measure of planning. Some areas can only be reached by tossing a crewmate across a gap or otherwise splitting up. The dedicated map (which was on the Wii U touchscreen) is gone from the Deluxe edition, but the addition of co-op throughout the campaign is a worthy exchange. It breathes new life into the game, making some of the most strenuous challenges much more manageable.

Another player can jump in at any time via split-screen co-op. Each player has free rein (or whistle) to enlist Pikmin and explore the map for fruit and other elements. That cooperative framework was already in place originally, but through A.I. companions or multiplayer side missions. In Deluxe, it's easier than ever to coordinate goals for an in-game day and find efficient ways to accomplish them. A bridge needs to be constructed? I can focus on that element with my little group as my teammate aims their attention on scouring the area for hidden fruit. Functionally, it is the same process as before, but being able to simply talk to another person and come up with plans together or react on the fly is more engaging than I would have guessed.

In addition to the campaign, you can spend some time with a variety of different side missions. Most of those are from the original release or its DLC, but there's also a new string of missions that show what a pair of other explorers, Olimar and Louie, got up to after the events of the story. It's a pretty slight addition, but I enjoyed mastering each set of challenges (with a helper) to unlock platinum medals in each one. I also liked seeing a few twists on the mission types and even a small tweak or two to familiar maps. Seeing a stream I've crossed dozens of times drained wasn't mind-blowing by any stretch, but it was a nice change of pace.

Pikmin 3 was one of my favorite Wii U games, which isn't meant to be the faint praise it sounds like. Thanks to Pikmin 3 Deluxe, players who didn't get around to checking it out in its original form have a chance to do so on the Switch. And better yet, they're getting a version that lives up to its potential as a game to bring people together – even if it's just to move tangerines and grapes around. » **Jeff Cork**

Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit

An occasional wipeout

Style 1 to 4-Player Racing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Velan Studios **Release** October 16 **Rating** E

Since its debut on the SNES, the Mario Kart series has been one of Nintendo's most consistently fun franchises. Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit invites you to bring the action into the real world, using your Switch and a physical remote-controlled car with a camera to bridge the gap between reality and your screen. The concept of configuring your room as a racetrack and speeding through it as Mario is an exciting prospect, and while it's often novel and enjoyable, a few noteworthy speedbumps prevent it from taking home the gold trophy.

Mario Kart Live gives you one go-kart (featuring either Mario or Luigi), four gates, and two arrow signboards in the box. Using these pieces, you can build whatever course you can fit in the space you have. You can customize each gate onscreen with unlockable elements, including item blocks, boosts, piranha plants that grab you, and chain chomps that pull you in random directions. Once your gates are laid out and customized, you draw the road by steering your kart through the gates to paint the track. Then it's off to the races against A.I.-controlled Bowser Jr. and the Koopalings.

Once you're in a race, the mixed-reality experience works remarkably well most of the time, and it kept me entertained. I dodged goombas while drifting into a sharp turn by my coat rack, then blasted an enemy with a red shell. However, the virtual track sometimes doesn't overlay the floor perfectly. This issue played tricks on my eyes and made me think turns were sooner than they were, and on rare occasions, a gate didn't recognize that I passed through it.

I often ran into the sides of gates, which distorts the track; your option is to either deal with the changing conditions or pause mid-race to fix them. The game recommends you lay something heavy on each foot to keep it in place, but unless you happen to have a bunch of compact, heavy objects (I used 16 soda cans, two on each gate foot), this is something you have to put up with or compensate for when you design your stages. This frustration is further accentuated by in-game items and environments that are designed to push you off course; the sandstorm environment is neat because it blows the physical kart all over the place, but it also caused me to run into a gate more than a couple of times.

To get started, I had to make significant adjustments to my living room, moving the coffee table against the wall and rolling up my rug because it was too thick for the kart's wheels. To have any sort of creative freedom, you need a sizeable open area, which could make this difficult for people in smaller houses or apartments to enjoy. Even in my relatively open main floor, I struggled to come up with ideas that would fit within the space. After moving to my more-open basement, I could flex my creative muscles a bit more, but the carpet slowed the kart down enough that I quickly returned to the hardwood surface of my living room.

I enjoyed wracking my brain to come up with clever configurations for my space. From a straightforward oval-shaped track and a figure-8 to a course with a long straightaway and a tight turn that weaved under my dining room table, I had fun getting creative within a space I was already familiar with. I loved taking a step back and looking at my living room in new ways to figure out how else I could expand the course. However, since a standard race lasted just around a minute with the space I was playing in, even my favorite designs got old before long.

Driving around your room delivers the standard Mario Kart feel, even if the backdrop is your real-life house. Blasting through your rivals while you're powered up with a star is just as exciting as it is in the mainline series, and getting taken out by a blue shell in the final lap is just as infuriating. However, with a smaller stable of powerups and shorter, less varied courses to race through, the experience grows stale faster.

Time trials and custom races are amusing, but I spent most of my time in the three-race Grand Prix. You can reconfigure your track between each event, but with the mode applying distinct effects for each race, I didn't feel compelled to go through the lengthy process of redrawing the track each time. Grand Prix is great for collecting coins to spend on cosmetic customizations for Mario/Luigi and the kart, but it's even better for unlocking faster speeds and new environments to apply to custom courses; once I got the zippy 150cc and 200cc, I couldn't imagine heading back to anything slower.

Despite its shortcomings, Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit still brings hours of fun. While firing up Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is more convenient and fully featured, Mario Kart Live's unique take on the series is worth checking out for those looking for exciting twists on a well-worn concept. » **Brian Shea**

7.5

Switch

» Concept
Speed through your living room in a mixed-reality experience where you use your Switch to drive a physical remote-controlled car through a course you built

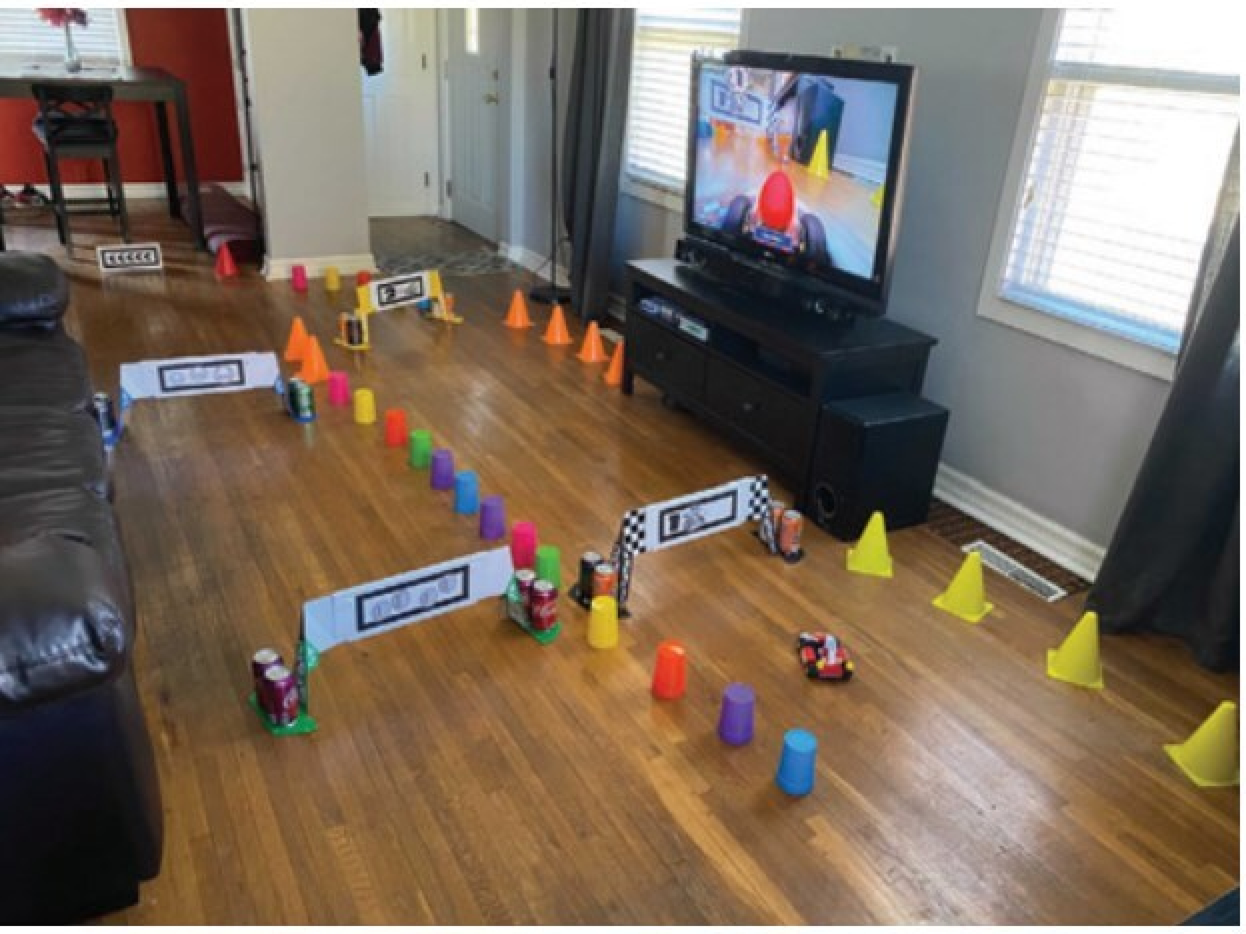
» Graphics
Most of what you see on your screen is direct feed from the RC car's camera, but the way the in-game effects overlay and mix with reality creates entertaining visuals

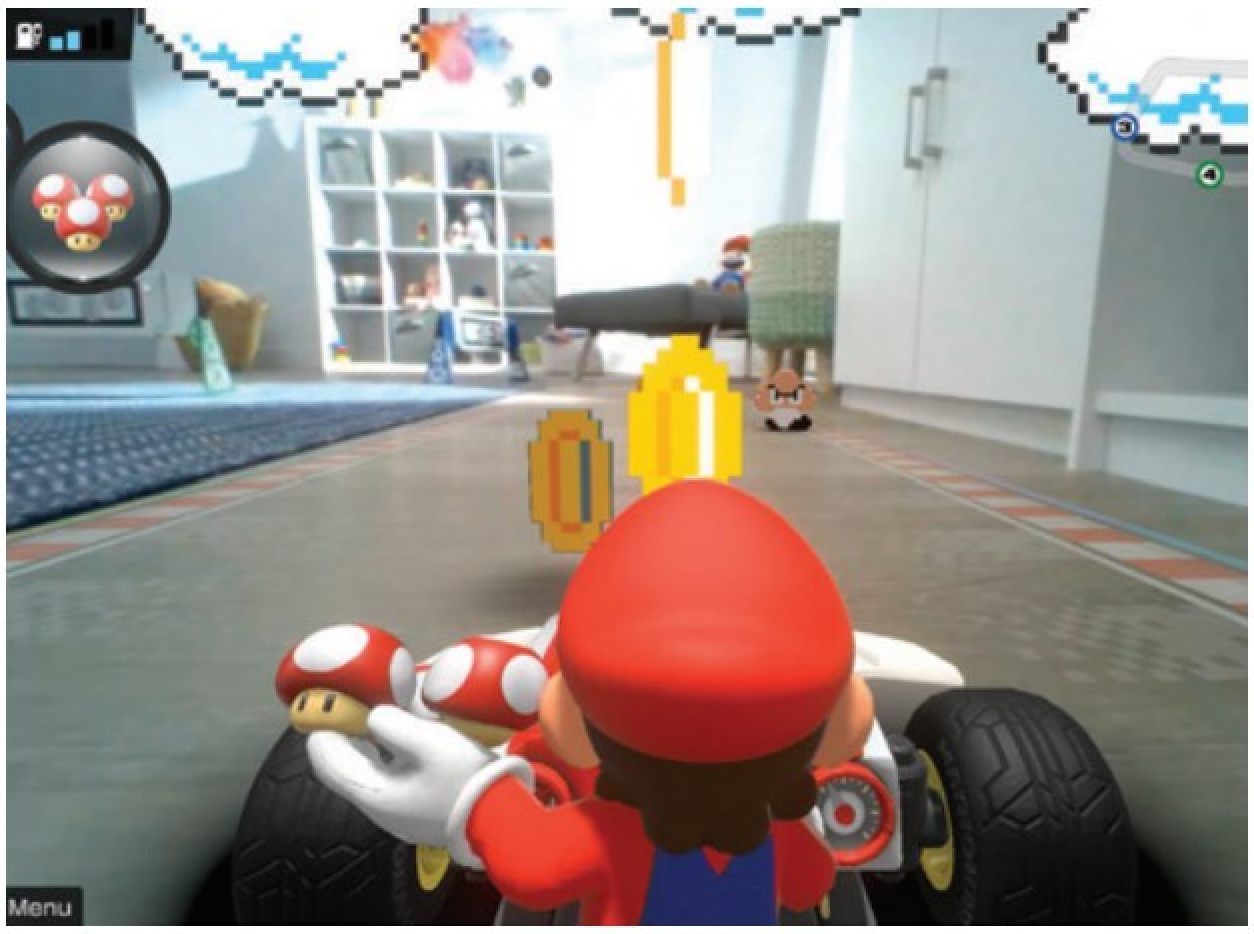
» Sound
From the screaming engines to the familiar music tracks, Mario Kart fans will feel right at home

» Playability
Controlling an RC car has never been easier thanks to simple controls on the Switch, but be ready to fix your course setup every couple of races

» Entertainment
While it doesn't deliver a flawless performance, Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit is a novel concept that provides a unique twist to the well-established racing experience

» Replay Value
Moderate





What About Multiplayer?

In addition to racing against A.I. characters, Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit is playable with up to four people locally. However, each person must have their own kart and their own Switch, making it an expensive proposition. Due to the limited availability of pre-launch units, I was unable to test the multiplayer component for this review.

the score

8.5 Devil May Cry 5: Special Edition

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
Release November 10 (Xbox Series X/S), November 12 (PS5) **Rating** M

Even if Devil May Cry has pulled the old "You can play as Vergil now" move before, the character is a perennial favorite for a reason: He is a hell of a lot of fun to control, and that still holds true in this enhanced version of Devil May Cry 5. – Joe Juba

7.5 Sakuna: Of Rice And Ruin

Platform PS4 • Switch • PC **Release** November 10 **Rating** T

Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin is full of highs and lows. From one moment to the next, it can be a lot of fun. Farming and fighting are each entertaining independently, but the systems supporting those central concepts feel unrefined. – Joe Juba

7.5 Amnesia: Rebirth

Platform PS4 • PC **Release** October 20 **Rating** M

Even after I felt like I'd seen behind the curtain and knew how the machinery worked, I still moved timidly through Amnesia: Rebirth's world, which is a testament to Frictional Games' superb environmental design and sound work. – Ben Reeves

8 The Red Lantern

Platform Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release October 22 **Rating** T

Even if survival games don't typically draw you in, The Red Lantern offers a magic that supersedes the genre. The art style and narrative flow in a way that isn't constrained necessarily by its mechanics or the usual bindings that survival games typically come with. – Liana Ruppert

8 Torchlight III

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** October 13 **Rating** T

Torchlight III is an approachable action/RPG that's especially welcoming to newcomers, or simply players who don't want to focus too hard on their evening's entertainment. – Matt Miller

7.5 NHL 21

Platform PS4 • Xbox One **Release** October 16 **Rating** E10+

As has been the story the last few years, the strategy and ideas are in place for EA Vancouver to take its game to the next level, but they need some work and fine tuning. As we move into the next generation, this will be essential to get right. For now, NHL 21 gets the job done. – Kimberley Wallace

7.5 The Dark Pictures Anthology: Little Hope

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** October 30 **Rating** M

Little Hope is inconsistent, like a witch-in-training still learning how to fully weave a spell. It sets up its story well and keeps you guessing, but the execution is lacking. It needs more variety and interesting things for your characters to do. – Kimberley Wallace

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The True Value Of Lost And Rare Games

Have some old video games sitting around gathering dust? As the value for lost and rare copies of vintage games continues to grow, it might be time to discover what your own collection is worth. Here's our picks for the most expensive and interesting video games sold at auction.

by Blake Hester

THE WORLD'S LARGEST VIDEO GAME COLLECTION

How much it sold for: ???
What makes it special: In 2014, collector Michael Thomasson offloaded his personal collection of more than 11,000 games to a mystery bidder. "The person that purchased the collection is a celebrity, and part of the requirement of the sale was that I would not reveal his/her name and/or the selling price," Thomasson told us.

Source: https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/57366/largest-video-game-collection-earth-sells-750000

THE NINTENDO PLAYSTATION PROTOTYPE

How much it sold for: $360,000
What makes it special: The Nintendo PlayStation is a relic of the failed partnership between Sony and Nintendo to make a disc-based console together, which led to Sony making its first PlayStation console. Once owned by former Sony Computer Entertainment of America president Olaf Olafsson, the prototype console was sold by Dan Diebold, who discovered it sitting in his dad's attic in 2020.

Source: https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-06-nintendo-playstation-auction-done.html

SUPER MARIO BROS.

How much it sold for: $114,000
What makes it special: This ultra-rare copy of the first Super Mario Bros. game is part of a small run of production variants where Nintendo sealed its titles with shrink-wrap instead of stickers, as evident by the box's hangtab being underneath the plastic. It currently holds the Guinness World Record for "most expensive video game sold at an online auction," a feat accomplished by an anonymous buyer in July 2020.

Source: https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2020/7/super-mario-bros-game-from-1985-sells-for-114-000-at-auction-623921

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS GOLD CARTRIDGE

How much it sold for: $100,088
What makes it special: Made for the 1990 Nintendo World Championship tour, and featuring the games Super Mario Bros., Tetris, and Rad Racer, which competitors would try to get the highest score in, this gold cartridge is one of 26 ever made. Despite not being in the greatest condition, the sale for this NWC cartridge is still five times more than other known transactions, which have topped out around $20,000.

Source: https://www.polygon.com/2014/2/5/5380924/nintendo-world-championships-cartridge-sells-for-100k-on-ebay

SEALED MEGA MAN "DR. WRIGHT" VARIANT

How much it sold for: $75,000
What makes it special: The back of the "Dr. Wright" variant features one key difference over most copies of the original Mega Man – it identifies Dr. Wily as Dr. Wright, a change made after the game had first entered production and implemented in later runs. Purchased in December 2019, it's rumored to be the only still-sealed copy in existence.

Source: https://comics.ha.com/heritage-auctions-press-releases-and-news/mega-man-video-game-sets-75-000-world-record-as-most-expensive-ever-sold-at-public-auction

STADIUM EVENTS

How much it sold for: $41,300
What makes it special: One of the most-coveted (and rare) games of all time, this factory-sealed copy of Stadium Events, purchased on eBay in February 2010, is one of the few still-sealed copies of the game known to exist.

Source: https://kotaku.com/collectors-item-obliterates-record-for-rare-game-sale-5479360

AIR RAID

How much it sold for: $33,433
What makes it special: At the time of its sale in November 2012, this copy of Air Raid was one of three boxed copies known to exist, and the only one with the previously undiscovered instruction manual. At the time it was the "most expensive 'consumer-available' video game ever sold at auction."

Source: https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/11/06/atari-air-raid-sells-for-33000-at-auction

NINTENDO POWERFEST CARTRIDGE

How much it sold for: $12,000
What makes it special: One of only two that exist, the Nintendo Powerfest cartridge was used in Nintendo Powerfest competitions around the United States in 1994. Buyer JJ Hendricks wrote in a blog post that the purchase required "74 emails, 27 months, 6 phone calls, 5 failed meeting attempts, [and] 1 sack of cash" before he could secure his copy in 2012.

Source: https://blog.pricecharting.com/2012/07/how-i-got-nintendo-powerfest-94.html

NBA ELITE 11

How much it sold for: $9,515.35
What makes it special: After a demo for NBA Elite 11 was lambasted by players, EA decided to cancel the game at the very last second – after the title went gold. Because it was so last second, a few copies shipped to stores. There are only about 15 copies of NBA Elite 11 known to exist, making it one of the rarest PlayStation 3 games of all time.

Source: https://www.videogameschronicle.com/features/most-rare-and-expensive-games/

DEAD SPACE ULTRA LIMITED EDITION

How much it sold for: $2,999.00
What makes it special: One of only 1,000 produced, this limited-edition copy of Dead Space was bought by Damian Fraimorice in 2011 and currently holds the Guinness World Record for "most expensive Xbox 360 game sold at auction."

Source: https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-expensive-xbox-360-game-(second-hand)

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